Tracking the Elements (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 53:26

This morning we're going to play around with tracking the elements. This is part of the first Satipaṭṭhāna, mindfulness of body, and the role of the body is extremely important in this practice. I'd like to say that this is not a spiritual practice—it's a physical practice, because it's done within the body. In fact, I can't think of any Pali word which would actually translate as "spiritual." I think it's an alien concept for the Buddha.

When we start talking about this, we're reminded that the Buddha's Dharma, his teaching, is a first-person discourse. What he's interested in is the nature of human experience from the perspective of the one undergoing the experience. He's not looking at things from an objective third-person viewpoint—broadly speaking, what we might call the scientific viewpoint. He's looking at things from the first-person experiential viewpoint.

For example, we understand—if I remember my high school science correctly, and it was a long time ago so things could have changed—but in those days it was considered that the center of the solar system was the Sun, and the Earth orbited around it and rotated on its axis as it did so. Hence you have the illusion that the Sun rises in the east and sets in the west. That's from a third-person objective viewpoint. From a first-person subjective viewpoint, mate, the sun rises in the east and it sets in the west. It goes around us. Now, to say that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west is not to contradict the scientific third-person objective explanation. It's just a different perspective. The Buddha's not offering scientific explanations about what's going on. He's talking about how experience itself unfolds.

Sometimes I like to point out that you would not go to the Buddha to learn geography. I mean, he thought the world was flat. He thought there were four continents: one to the north, one to the south, one to the east, one to the west. A great mountain in the middle, and on top of the mountain are the gods. He lived in the southern continent, the rose apple continent. Surrounding the four continents is the great ocean, and holding the great ocean together is the great wind. As I say, you would not go to him for geographical advice.

This actually reminds me of when I was a monk in Thailand. I spent some time at a study monastery up north. This was essentially a school for novices, a seminary. What they were studying was the kind of monastic high school curriculum for Burmese monasteries—this was a monastery in Thailand that actually taught the Burmese curriculum. It was all based on memorization and it was all very traditional. I spent a bit of time there learning Thai and Pali.

One day we were out doing chores, sweeping the yard, and one of the monks who spoke some English

came up to me with one of the student novices, a teenage boy. He said, "This seminarian has got a question for you." I said, "Oh, sure. What's the question?" The question was: "Is the earth flat?" I was a bit taken aback. I thought about it and said, "No, not really. It's round." This was explained to the boy. He looked a bit agitated and spoke rapidly in Thai. My Thai friend turned to me and said, "Prove it."

I thought about that one. Photographs. I've seen photographs. People have been up there, they've gone around it, they've taken photographs, and the photographs have been published. It's round. This was explained to the boy, and he looked very agitated and stomped off. The curriculum he was studying is medieval.

He's studying the classic Buddhist cosmology, and obviously he had heard rumors that his cosmology wasn't exactly correct. I confirmed it for him. I hope this did not affect his faith in the Buddha.

But we're not doing science here. We're doing something different. We're doing something experiential. So for the Buddha, when he talks about body, he's not talking about body the way a doctor would talk about body. He's talking about body from the perspective of *being* a body. He's talking about our experience of body.

And body for the Buddha has two meanings, a broad meaning and a narrow meaning. In the broad sense, body refers to all five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. In other words, the entire experienced physical universe is body. In the narrow sense, body is the fifth of these five physical senses, and it refers to sensitivity to touch. That touch can be internal or external. External touch would include the touch of the body against the cushion or the bench or the chair that you're sitting on. Internal touch would include any aches and pains within the body. All of these we refer to as touching.

But the key point is that body does not mean our concepts about body. Normally we do not directly experience the body. We experience body through a filter of concepts about the body. For example, we are obsessed about how our body appears to others and even to ourselves. Anybody got a mirror? How many times per day would you look at it? Well, Royal doesn't look at it at all—he's transcended that. Others would gaze at it with great interest. And what we're looking at is our concept of ourselves.

We also find ourselves lost in concept about the body when we come to do the meditation practice. We're given something basic and physical to be aware of—be aware of breathing, be aware of movement as you walk. And we find very easily that we're not really aware of the body, we're not really mindful of body, but we're mindful of our concepts about the body. For example, what we are supposed to feel in this practice, what is supposed to happen, what I am supposed to look like when I'm meditating. That's a big one.

Have you ever—here we've got individual rooms, so you've got privacy—but have you ever gone really mindfully towards the dormitory, mindfully gone down the corridors, mindfully opened up the door, stepped inside, closed it, and gone... "Thank God I'm out of view"? You can see how much the concept of

body, what I'm supposed to look like, filters through.

If you ever do a self-retreat where you are completely alone, it's really interesting. The first time I did it, it took about two or three days for it to finally really click: no one can see me. There is no audience. And when it happened, it was like a real shocker. The way that I practiced just changed once that inner audience had disappeared.

So all of this is concept. It isn't the direct experience of body. What we're interested in with mindfulness of the body is what is really going on in the body, as distinct from any concept we have about the body. We'll talk more about this tonight, I think.

But for the Buddha, if we look beneath the concept—what's really going on underneath?

Well, Sayadaw U Pandita used to have this little parlor trick. He would raise his hand and say, "What's this?" When people recovered from the discombobulation, someone might be bold enough to say, "That's a hand." "Yep, very good, big tick." And then he'd go, "What's this?"

A fist. Yes, very good. And then he would open his hand and very slowly close it again, wanting to know: when is the moment when the hand became a fist? Because whatever moment you pick turns out to be the wrong one. Hand and fist are just concepts.

So what do we actually experience in the hand? If I have a meditation exercise in which I simply hold my hand out, close my eyes, and actually feel what the sensation is, then slowly start to close it—what I will get isn't hand and fist. It will be a whole series of discrete, separate sensations: hardness, movement, sharpness, heat, stickiness, stiffness, and so on. In other words, the concept "this is my hand" does not survive sustained awareness. What survives sustained awareness are the directly experienced qualities of the body.

These directly experienced qualities are what the Buddha calls *dhātu*, or elements. They're considered elements because when we start to cut through the concept about a direct experience until we finally come to the actual experience itself, we arrive at these individual sensations, individual phenomena. They are elements because after the concept breaks down, what we're left with are these. They are what survives sustained awareness.

For example, let's say I'm meditating on breathing, and suddenly I get lost in my thoughts. What I'm doing is living in a world created by these thoughts. During that time, this world seems real, although it's far away from here and now. Then suddenly I know that I'm thinking, and the world created by these thoughts vanishes instantly. This world did not survive awareness. It's not real—it's a concept, a fantasy.

So I come back to another world, and this is a world in which my left knee hurts and I really don't want to be sitting here any longer. But I'm following the meditation instructions, so I decide to note the distraction. I'm noting my painful left knee, and I discover that this painful left knee is actually made up of a whole

series of sensations that are coming and going and which actually hold my attention. After some time I realize that my world of "I don't want to be sitting here" has dissolved. It has not survived sustained awareness. Even my left knee dissolves, because all I know is a flow of sensations. The left knee has not survived sustained awareness.

So you can see it's a breaking down of the world of concept, progressively letting go and discovering a world made up of discrete, directly experienced phenomena. For the Buddha, this is the realm of the elements. This is the world that, when we do this practice, we're trying to enter and stay in.

Is any of this making sense?

So let's have a look at the world of touch sensation, the fifth physical sensitivity. This is body in the narrow sense. The Buddha says that these sensations break down into what he calls the four great appearances, the *mahābhūta*: earth element, fire element, water element, and air element. These are the elemental qualities of experience.

Earth element is the experience of resistance, from soft through to hard. Air element is the experience of all forms of movement—pressure, vibration, expansion, contraction, and so on. Fire element is the experience of temperature, from cold through to hot. And water element, which is the most obscure, is the experience of liquidity and cohesion. Liquidity is wetness and dryness; cohesion is stickiness and slipperiness.

Let's say I hold my hands up and start to bring them together. I'm experiencing movement, and in the hand itself there's a certain amount of hardness, stiffness. At some point the fingers touch, and at that point there's no resistance to further movement. That resistance at first is soft. If I keep moving the hands in the same direction, it gets harder and harder. This resistance is earth element. With that contact, there's also a spike in temperature—fire element. And of course there's movement—air element. These are the elements, and they are elemental qualities of experience.

You find the same four elements in the European tradition, but there they're felt to be objective aspects of the universe. The Buddha is saying something different: he's seeing them simply as aspects of experience.

So what we're going to do is have a brief tour of the elements as a meditation exercise.

Start to construct your meditation posture, working on it from the ground up. Begin with the contact at the base of the body, feeling those sensations, feeling the balance. From there, lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact on the ground. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Now turn your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel hardness. Where can you find

hardness? Look for hardness. And when you find it, focus on it and name it: *hard*.

Now turn your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel softness. Where can you find softness? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *soft*.

Once more, open your awareness to your whole body, experiencing your whole body.

Now turn your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel heat or warmth. Look for heat, warmth. And when you find it, focus on it and name it: *hot*, *warm*.

Now turn your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel cold or coolness. Look for cold, coolness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *cold*, *cool*.

Again, open your awareness so you're feeling your whole body.

Now direct your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel wetness. Where can you find wetness? Look for it, and if you find it, focus on it and name it: *wet*.

Now focus on those parts of your body where you feel dryness. Look for dryness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *dry*.

Once more, open your awareness to your whole body, feeling your whole body.

Now turn your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel movement. Look for movement. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *moving*.

Moving.

And now focus on those parts of your body where you feel stillness. Look for stillness. And if you can find it, focus on it. Name it.

Still.

Still.

Now once more open your awareness to include your whole body and open up to the flow of all the elements. Don't try to hold on to any one sensation. Don't focus in on any one sensation. But allow all of the sensations to flow naturally. Don't try to find anything in particular. Just be aware of whatever is happening within your body without trying to control it.

Coming out of that meditation, that was a quick tour of the elements. Of those different elements and their various aspects, which did you find easiest to locate, and once you found it, easiest to hold on to? Which were the most obvious ones?

Movement was mentioned. Did you find stillness? Some did, some didn't. One person found stillness and

hardness in the same areas. So movement, pretty easy, straightforward. Hardness? What about softness? Did you find softness? A bit harder, not so obvious.

So our two candidates for easiest to find are hardness and movement. But interestingly, movement was experienced not as a discrete, separate element, but rather as part of the whole package.

What was the most difficult one to find? Stillness. Even what seemed to be still had a kind of tingling or buzzing. So even stillness was moving.

The stillness one is actually a relatively new addition to my teaching, because our element is the experience of movement. So I just had movement for years. And then one of the meditators objected. He said, "Look, for hardness you also include softness. For wetness you also include dryness. If you've got movement, you should include stillness." I thought, I can't argue with that. So I've included it. But it's a tricky one. Some people find it and some people don't.

Of course—and this is really basic—whatever you find is correct. You are never wrong. Your experience is your experience. Full stop.

One person mentioned they hadn't ever noticed the amount of movement everywhere. Good. Of course, according to the Buddha, these being elements, they're everywhere.

So if we talk about movement, the obvious place is in breathing. And breathing is geographically located in a particular part of the body. But air element is everywhere—everywhere in the body, and everywhere throughout the universe. The same is true for hearing and seeing, tasting. And I'm trying to think about it as I'm speaking—I suppose there is, you know, like the sound of rain, wetness. You might find those elements in the other senses as well.

One thing I always point out, and what I find very useful about this kind of exercise, is that you can find these elements in the mind. As far as I know, the Buddha never talks about them in the mind—he always just talks about them in terms of the body. But you can find them in the mind as well. Sometimes the heart is hard. Sometimes the heart is soft. Sometimes the emotion is wet. Sometimes it's dry. And so on.

I find it very useful that once you get a sense of these elemental qualities somewhere, which is simply in the body, you can start to open it up and recognise them everywhere. Which is very useful.

In our culture we throw around terms like "mind-body" as if they're separate. But as you point out, for the Buddha, they're interconnected. They're not separate. So he doesn't really talk about mind-body. He talks about nama-rupa, which we're going to be discussing more. That's the movement of mind to be aware of something, and that which is aware—they come together. So that which is aware could be what we would call body. There's a movement of the mind. And if you have one, you have the other. But that which is aware could also be mind—mind entangling with mind. Yes, interconnection, relationship—that's how the Buddha looks at things. But in the way we use language, we assume these are two separate realms, and

sometimes they send ambassadors to each other.

Did anybody find that looking for these elemental qualities was hard work? Like you had to really focus to find it?

Some are harder than others.

Some are harder than others, for sure. One thing you notice here is your own sensitivity. For example, hardness and movement—earth element, air element. These generally are the two that most people find easiest to discover. And if you look at most of the meditation objects, they're earth and air. Breathing is air element. Sweeping the body, touch sensation—mostly earth element. And so on.

So one thing you're doing is mapping your particular set of sensitivities as it presents now. If you're looking for something to ground the awareness, you go for the obvious. If you can't find something, you never worry about it. You never concern yourself with what you cannot find. You just focus on what you do find, because that gives you awareness of something to hold on to. You can stay with it over a period of time. And as the mind becomes stronger and more sensitive, things which before were hidden will begin to come out. You begin to see them.

So it's a mixed package, and you're working with your sensitivities—you always favour what you're sensitive to.

Certainly these exercises are exercises in aim. Look for hard, not soft—hard. Now switch to soft, not hard—soft. We're learning to aim awareness precisely. And this is important for insight meditation.

For serenity practice, this kind of precision is not so important—you probably wouldn't bother with it. But for insight, it's essential. Insight meditation, as we'll explore more as we continue, is based on the perception of impermanence, the perception of change, of universal movement. And that means being able to distinguish between one thing and another—to see that this has changed into that. To perceive this clearly, the mind needs to be quite sharp, quite clear. So in this style of practice, developing that sharpness, that clarity, is really important. Working with the elements is an excellent exercise for cultivating that precision, because it opens up the perception of impermanence.

Take, for example, the word *vipassanā*, which is translated as insight. It's a compound word. *Passanā* is seeing, and the prefix *vi-* denotes separately, distinctly. So seeing separately, seeing distinctly. This is different from that. That is not this. This kind of perception is crucial for developing insight.

But as we said, to stimulate the mindfulness, always go for what is clearest and most obvious. Notice the difference between opening the awareness out to cover the whole field of the body, and focusing in, zeroing in on one particular aspect. Both approaches are good, both work, both are satisfactory—but you may find that one works better than the other for you.

Did anybody find a sense of relief when you opened up to the whole, to all of the elements? Yes? Like, "Ah,

now I don't have to work so hard." So sometimes it's appropriate to go in for the detail, but if you find that stress or strain is being caused by this effort, then it can be good to drop it and simply open up. And to learn to move between one and the other. The Buddha talks about malleability, or the pliability of the mind, as something we cultivate in meditation practice. If I want the mind to go here, I can send it here. If I want it to go there, I can send it there. This is part of the craft we're learning.

A participant asks: When you talk about focusing and being able to name hard, soft, cold, hot—and that naming has the capacity to resolve discomfort—what's happening there?

The naming was very much part of this exercise. And the naming is part of clarification, precision. What exactly am I aware of? So that helps to clarify the experience, and you get a sense of what the naming is for. But basically, when you zero in on something, it starts to break up into its component parts. We take something to be one, but when we examine it closely, it turns out to be more than one.

The classic example is the self. I take myself to be one—that's me. But if I'm actually looking at the flow of experience, I realize that what I consider "me" is actually a whole bundle of experiences, reactions, and sensations. The Buddha talks about—I forget the exact terms—a perception that sees things in bundles and the perception that sees them as separate. It's teasing things apart. And this teasing things apart is very much part of the insight process.

What we take to be a solid something, which we can identify with—"this is me" or "this is mine"—when we start to really examine it, we see that actually it isn't solid. It's broken up into all sorts of different processes. These processes are in relationship with one another. They move according to different relationships. And "I" disappear in the midst of them.

The classic example with painful sensation: "I am hurting." We start off with that. Okay, well, what is hurting? So I'm interested. I send the awareness to the sensation. And I find that there are different sensations coming and going. Then I notice that it's not just the sensations—there's also what the mind is doing.

And the mind has aversion. I really don't want this. I want it to end. So I can switch to there—I can just see the aversion itself. Again, the elements can be useful. I find aversion is often hard. There's a hardness in the heart, as it were.

And then I can say, well, actually, what I'm taking to be one solid thing—"it hurts"—is actually a collection of sensations and a collection of psychological responses that come together and produce this. But you challenge any one of these, and the whole thing collapses. So if I've got the sensation but I don't have the aversion, it's not pain. It's something else.

So it's a breaking apart. You could say insight involves two basic movements: analysis and synthesis. Not analysis in the intellectual sense, but analysis in the sense of breaking things apart. And then we bring them together again in a different way. And for the Buddha, it's bringing them together again in a way

that does not involve a self. That is what opens up the world of insight.

So you can see that what we're doing in this exercise is starting the breaking-apart process and getting used to that. And it comes from the habit of, first of all, not taking anything for granted, not assuming that we already know, and being precise with the actual direct experience. What is this? What is this? What is that? And if we practice accordingly, things start to break up.

Any questions or comments? Clear as mud?

Alright, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is when you can, be more precise with your awareness. Now you might have noticed that being precise takes a lot of energy. And what you'll find is you can't do it all the time. The mind becomes tired. So fine—sometimes you're quite general with the awareness, and sometimes you zero in and you're quite precise. Learn to move between one and the other.

And you might find that those parts of the day when you're most wide awake are the parts where it's most appropriate to go in for the detail, to really see what exactly is going on here. At the Mahasi Centre, the way Sayadaw U Pandita taught, we used to have interviews six days a week, and he would want you to report what you thought was your best sitting and your best walking session—detailed analysis. So you had to be really precise in order to satisfy his demands. And what I found, and what a lot of people found, was that each day when you went in, you would report the sitting and the walking at the same time of day. There would be a time of day when you would peak, when you were at your sharpest, and that would be the sitting and the walking that you would tell him about. Regular as clockwork, it could be. It's quite remarkable.

So you do find that there are certain times of day when the mind is clearest and sharpest. That's when you do this kind of work with the elements. There are other times of day when the mind is much more dull, or at least not energetic. Then you open up and do a more general awareness. You work according to your rhythm. Biorhythm has a lot to do with it.

Okay, thank you very much.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.