Tracking Elements (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 57:41

This morning we're going to talk about tracking the elements.

This is part of the first Satipaṭṭhāna, the first foundation of mindfulness, which is body. We've talked about the role of body before, how important it is. The Buddha outlines the practice and divides it into four sections: body, feeling, mind, dharma. So body comes first, and it comes first for a reason. It's the foundation for the whole practice.

There's an essential physicality to this practice. In the European tradition we have this sense of something which is spiritual, which somehow transcends the body. But this is alien to the Buddha's way of looking at the human condition. We are bodies. We are sentient bodies. We are bodies that know, that are aware, and that feel. But we are fundamentally bodies. So we practice with body. The relationship with body is really important.

As we talked about yesterday, the Buddha's whole project is about the nature of human experience from the perspective of the one undergoing the experience. In other words, his teaching is first person. He's interested in how we experience whatever it is. So when he talks about body, what he's talking about is our experience of body. He's not stepping back out of it and taking a third-person view of the body, like a doctor might, for example. He's talking about what it is to be inside body, to be body. Whenever the Buddha says body, he means our experience of body. Whenever he says mind, he means our experience of mind, and so on.

Also, when he uses the term body, he can use it in a broad sense or a narrow sense. In the broad sense, body refers to the five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. In other words, the entire experienced physical universe. But sometimes he focuses in on a narrow sense, the fifth of the five physical senses, which is sensitivity to touch, whether internal or external. As we sit here, external touch would include the touch of the body against the cushion, the bench, the chair. Internal touch would include any aches or pains in the body, the sense of stiffness and lift in the spine, and so on.

In particular—and this is something that especially in our culture we need to keep in mind—body does not mean our concepts about body. Of course we tend to live in our concepts; we live in a conceptual world which is separated from body. But even our experience of body is filtered by layers of concept. We are obsessed about how our body appears to ourselves and to others, all of which is concept.

We also find ourselves lasting in concept about body when we come to practice meditation. When we're given a basic instruction to make some aspect of body the meditation object, like breathing or movement

in the walking meditation, we find ourselves not really being mindful of body, but mindful of our concepts about body. Have you ever been preoccupied by what you are supposed to feel in this practice? What is meant to happen? This doesn't seem right. It doesn't feel like what's supposed to happen. Do you ever have that experience? In other words, not paying attention to the body, but paying attention to concepts about body and taking them to be more significant than the actual physical experience itself.

A lot of the basic work of meditation practice is descending from our concepts about something to the direct experience. When we're working with the body, we need to get away from the concepts about the body and get to the actual experience itself.

One way that Upandita introduced this is he held up his hand one time and said, "What's this?" Of course everybody was paralysed and in shock because they knew this was a trick question. But it wasn't. The answer is hand. Then he said, "What's this?" The answer: fist. The bleeding obvious—that's a hand, that's a fist.

Very few people would care to dispute this, and those few would have had years of training in philosophy. Or law, as the case may be.

Then he would have us do an exercise. Let's do that now.

Use your hand as your meditation object. Simply have your hand out, close your eyes, and feel your hand. Don't look at it. Just feel it. And ask yourself: What am I actually experiencing?

Now start to curl the fingers and keep your awareness on your hand. What am I actually experiencing? Keep curling. At some point, you might find fingers hitting the palm. Keep curling. And all the way through: What is it that I am actually experiencing?

So what did you experience? Weight. Tension. Heaviness. Wetness. Dampness. Pressure. Tingling. "Airy nothing"—that's very poetic. One person said they couldn't feel it at all if they tried, but really it was just nothing. And yet there was a quality of air to it. Why "airy nothing" as opposed to simply nothing? "I don't know why. Maybe I just felt like I needed an adjective." But there was something there, I'm sure. It's surprising because you thought, "I can't actually get a hold of it. It's not really there."

So it can be difficult just to get a hold of. When we pay attention, what do we find? Do we find hands and fists? No, we don't find hands and fists. We find a series of sensations that have certain qualities—heavy, damp, airy, tension, and so on.

Now when we say this, of course, that's a concept. It's not that we can just transcend concepts entirely. If we did, we'd certainly have nothing to say to each other—which might be a good thing, particularly on a meditation retreat. Actually, if we had no concepts, we wouldn't even know what time lunch would be.

That would be catastrophic. So we need concepts, and concepts go very deep. But tension, dampness, heaviness—these are concepts, but they're concepts that are much closer to the actual direct experience,

whereas "hand" and "fist" are more removed. This illustrates getting closer to what's underneath the concepts. What's the actual experience beneath the concepts? And this is what we're aiming for.

For the Buddha, this realm that exists underneath the concepts is what he calls the *dhātu*, which is usually translated as "element." Like a lot of these translations, it doesn't one hundred percent fit because he's coming at things from such a different angle, but it's pretty close. The elemental qualities of experience.

So we talked about, for example, what is real? Well, what is real, for practical purposes, is what survives presence. Hand and fist does not survive presence. Heaviness, dampness, movement—that survives presence. So these are the elemental qualities of experience, the *dhātu*.

Let's say I'm meditating with breathing as my meditation object and I get lost in my thoughts. I'm living in a world created by these thoughts, and this world is far away from here and now. Suddenly I know I'm thinking, and the world created by these thoughts disappears. So purely concept does not survive presence even for a moment.

I return to another world in which I'm sitting on my cushion and my left knee hurts and I really don't want to be sitting here—which is why, of course, I escaped into the world of thought in the first place. But I'm following meditation instructions, so I focus on the specific sensations that make up my painful left knee. They hold my attention. And after some time I realise that my world of "I don't want to be sitting here" has dissolved, because I'm absorbed in the sensations. So that does not survive presence. That turns out to be just a concept. Even my left knee will dissolve. And all I've got are a series of sensations that occupy space.

When we start to really pay attention to what's going on, the familiar world—which is essentially conceptual—that we're used to living in starts to crumble, and something else emerges. What emerges is the world of the elements. And this is the world in which insight can arise, which we'll talk more about later on.

So when we're tracking the elements, we're going to do this within the body. These are the elemental qualities of experience. The Buddha says that physical experience, touch sensation, breaks up into four elements which are particularly important. They're called the *mahābhūta*, the great appearances. Sometimes you see it translated as "the great things." These are earth element, air element, fire element, and water element. The four elements.

Of course, you probably recognise these from the European tradition. They have the same four elements. But in the European tradition, these elements are considered to be objectively existing things in the universe, as far as I'm aware. Whereas for the Buddha, they're elemental qualities of experience, which makes all the difference.

Earth element is the experience of resistance, which ranges from soft through to hard. Let's say I have my hands like this and I bring them together. There's some experience of resistance in the hand itself, which I

feel as stiffness. But I keep bringing the hands together, and there comes a point where I encounter resistance when one hand touches the other. At first this is soft, but if I keep moving in the same direction, it gets harder. So that quality of resistance is earth, and it ranges from soft through to hard.

Air element is the experience of all forms of motion—pressure, vibration, expansion, contraction, and so on. As I'm bringing the hands together, what is predominant is air element, the sense of movement through space.

Fire element is the experience of temperature, from cold to hot. I'm bringing the hands together: air element, movement; some stiffness in the hand, earth. They touch—there's resistance, earth, but also the temperature goes up, fire.

And water element is the most obscure one.

This is the experience of liquidity and cohesion. Liquidity is wetness and dryness. And cohesion is stickiness and slipperiness. So these are the four great elements.

We're going to do a little meditation exercise exploring them.

Settle awareness in your body, and be aware of the sensations at the base of your body. 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 attention 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. Hard.*

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

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

Now turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel heat or warmth. Where can you find heat? Warmth? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *Hot. Warm.*

Now focus on those parts of your body where you find cold or coolness. Look for cold, coolness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *Cold. Cool.*

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

From there, turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel wetness. Where can you find wetness? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *Wet.*

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

Open your awareness again to your whole body, feeling your whole body.

Turn your attention 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.*

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

Once more, open your awareness out to your whole body, experiencing your whole body. From there, tune into the flow of all the elements. Don't try to hold on to any one sensation, but allow all 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.

So which one was strongest and clearest?

"In the form of hardness," someone replied.

Yes, hardness. Not really clear where the edge was when it became softness, but it kind of...

So there's no hard border between hard and soft. That's one of the comforting things about concepts—they have hard borders. They give us a sense of security. But often the experience does not.

"Well, it's difficult to find," they acknowledged.

I understand. Did you find dryness? Did you find wetness?

"Yes, but not dryness. Much harder."

Interesting. I find dryness much easier to find than wetness. I'm a very dry individual.

"I found often the opposite was adjacent," another student offered. "So the tip of my tongue was very moist, and then just around the lips, just right there, just a little dry."

"I found that with hot and cold."

So the opposites, we could call them, or the other end of the spectrum, is very close. They're very close to each other.

Did anybody find stillness?

"In my periphery—my hands as opposed to movement in my chest."

So in the core of the body is movement, but the periphery is stillness.

"And I think it's cold—it's different. Not even coolness. All warmth. A lot of warmth."

So these are the elements, and you notice that what we're doing is taking body, which is a general area of concept, and then breaking it down into discrete experiences. Even so, we've still got concept because we've got a name. But the concept is closer to the actual experience. Even there we can see that there are ambiguities involved.

Notice the use of the naming. If I want to aim at warm, now I want to aim at cool—the name helps. If I drop the name in, the awareness will head in that direction. Now it may or may not hit the target, but it helps to aim awareness. And this capacity to aim awareness where we want it to go is important. I think it's particularly important for insight practice, because it's all about discernment, discrimination.

The word that gets translated as "insight" is *vipassanā*. *Vipassanā* is seeing—that *vi* denotes separation, distinctness, distinguishing one thing from another. So it implies developing an awareness that can break things apart, that can see the differences between this and that. When we're talking about impermanence, for instance, we can see the difference between the beginning and the end, where this ends and that begins. This is all about accuracy, about aim. And so you notice that the naming can help with that.

When we want to have the continuity of awareness, which is mindfulness, of course you notice that it's easiest to do that if the meditation object is clearest and most obvious. So of these elements, which is clearest, which is obvious—that's the one you will tend to go to. If you find a particular element to be obscure, you won't stay long there. You'll stay with the obvious ones.

And usually, for most people, the two obvious ones are earth and air—so hardness, softness, movement, stillness. If you look at the bulk of meditation methods, these are the elements they focus on. Body sensation often involves hardness and softness. Breathing involves movement. For most people, these are the obvious ones.

When the Buddha talks about the elements, he uses them in the context of body. The tracking of the elements is found in the first satipaṭṭhāna, tracking body. But they can also be very useful for tracking mind.

Let's say you find yourself caught up in some mood or emotional state, and you want to make it a meditation object, but you don't want to be caught up in concept. You don't want to start thinking, "What's this about? Why am I agitated? Oh, I'm agitated because..." and away you go, lost in the world of concept.

But let's say I'm agitated. This sense of agitation—is it still or is it moving? Is it hard or is it soft? Is it hot or is it cold? Applying the elements to the mind can be extremely useful. Although, as I said, I don't think the Buddha actually does it that way—but I think we're improving on the Buddha. I shouldn't have said that with him sitting in the room. But it is very useful for that.

So your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to spend the day playing with elements. Or if that

doesn't grab you, just don't worry about it. But you notice that in these exercises, the basic thing we were doing is being more precise in the awareness. And the precision is important. As the practice develops, as you settle and go deeper, the mind becomes stiller and more clear, and you want to be more precise when you can.

Now, if you make a point of doing this, you might find that it takes a fair bit of energy to be precise. And you might find that you can't do it all day long. Well, you don't. You just do it when there's energy in the mind. The way that you practice, the particular flavor of your practice, varies dependent upon conditions.

Question: I found with that practice that the concept of body started to dissolve. But I must have been aware of body to know that the concept dissolved. It's kind of like holding those two things at the same time. It's hard to describe, but it just felt like a dissolving of the body.

And what was there when the body dissolved?

The questioner: Well, that's when that contentless dread started to creep in.

That's interesting. The sense that we have of the body is the work of perception. Perception gives us a sense of "this is my body" and "this is what it looks like" and "this is what it feels like" and "this is how it occupies space"—and so on and so forth—and "that's your body" and "his body." So if the perception starts to dissolve, then that sense of body starts to dissolve.

In terms of the elements, you get people who talk about how the body disappears and what they've got are sensations occupying space. Sometimes they have a sense of location, so they could say, "These sensations are around the area where my hands would be, so they're probably sensations in my hands." But sometimes that dissolves, and all there is are sensations in space, and they can't tell where they are.

The familiar sense of this body and this physical world can dissolve away. And when that goes, it might trigger anxiety. Because what's going on? Where am I? Who am I? How can I navigate this world?

Insight meditation is very much about breaking up our normal perception of the world, because we want to come to a different way of perceiving—a way which for the Buddha is more accurate but also more satisfactory, giving us a better way of life. But in order to make that transition, we've got to give up what's familiar to us, what we seek to hold on to because it gives us a sense of security.

And paradoxically, of course, sometimes the very things that cause us a great deal of pain give us a great deal of security. This is familiar. I know who I am. I am the victim of the universe. You are the ultimate bastard in the universe. There's a stable world which has meaning here. And to give it up can be terrifying.

So it often emerges at some point in the insight journey—fear will arise because that which the mind habitually holds on to and constructs as familiar starts to give way. It's interesting that this happens with the hand exercise we did earlier. Even though what was happening was together and separate—and that

teasing them apart—that's very much the action of vipassanā. You have to develop a great deal of discernment to be able to do that, and that discernment you can apply elsewhere, to other things.

If you look at the Buddha's fundamental framework, it's dependent arising. He says what we assume is happening is that there's me, and there's other beings, and there's things, there's a world—and this is what's real. In the Buddha's concept of dependent arising, he says no, that is all a construction of the mind. What's actually happening is mutually conditioning events coming and going within awareness.

Now in order to get to that view, I've got to take the view that I'm born with, as it were, that I've been developing, and start to tease it apart. So the first part of developing insight is what we could call analysis—not intellectual analysis, but taking things and teasing them apart. And then, once we've separated them, they can come together, but in a different way, which is especially the dependent arising.

So what we're talking about this morning is the teasing apart. And anything that develops the discernment and the sharpness and the precision of mind that enables you to tease things apart—that is a really important skill that you can apply elsewhere, because the mind just gets used to it and starts to do it and it becomes a natural thing.

Someone asked: "We're doing this practice because we're looking for something, as you said, but we understand the centuries of benefit people have obtained from it. I know that Buddha was looking for something, but what made him think that sitting down and meditating for hours or for long periods of time... it's not an intuitive thing to do. So what made him embark on that?"

Well, he inherited an already existing yoga tradition. So when he left home, he didn't just go out and invent something new. He plugged into something that was already happening. And we know that home was Lumbini, which was on one of the major trading routes—one of the roads leading from further west, the kingdom of Kosala and the capital city of Sāvatthī. The road went to the east through Lumbini, through his hometown, and into what is now northern India, in Bihar State. That area was at the time the Vajji Confederation, a tribal republic, but it used to be the kingdom of Videha, and that was the centre of the yogic tradition. That's where he went.

This was an area where the early Upanishads were developed. There was this whole yogic tradition that had been there for centuries. He went there and plugged into it, and it involved a lot of meditation. That's where he did his boot camp training in meditation. Then when he was dissatisfied with that, he went further south. He crossed the Ganga into what is now South Bihar, and he tuned into a different tradition of shamanic and ascetic practices. Then eventually he kind of put it aside and invented his own way.

But it would have been natural for him to go into the idea that we don't really see what's going on because the mind is too agitated. If we want to see what's going on, we have to still the mind, and that's meditation. That was really built into the culture. People just understood that. But it's not built into our culture. It's alien to us, to Western culture, which is very unfortunate.

I think one of the good things about why "mindfulness" has come to the West is that it's introducing and spreading the notion: if you want to find out what's going on, it might be useful to sit down and pay attention. This is a radical notion for us. As you say, it's far from intuitive. But in other traditions, it's bleeding obvious. Somehow we either missed it or quite possibly it was just thrashed out of us. The Catholic Church is very suspicious of yoga because the people who run it are bureaucrats and politicians, not yogis. If you look at Indian spiritual traditions, the people who run it are the yogis.

In the West, it's the politicians and the bureaucrats who run things. And they are threatened by yogis because meditators might have an experience that doesn't fit in their books. Then what do you do? Do you adjust the books, or do you burn the yogi? It's easier to burn the yogi.

The Protestant tradition was hostile to contemplative practices—you read the book and Jesus talks to you, or whatever. They've got a different approach. So this kind of direct experiential approach got drained out of the European tradition. Not so much in Eastern Christianity; in the Orthodox traditions, it's stronger there, a lot stronger. But in Western Christianity, it got kind of pummeled out.

One of the great yogis in the Catholic tradition is John of the Cross, San Juan de la Cruz. And he had to be really, really careful in what he wrote because of the Inquisition. Apparently—and I have to look this up, but this is something I somehow know from the past but can't remember where, therefore can't be sure it's actually genuine; it could be urban legend—but the Inquisition got really suspicious of him, and they sent out two investigators to where he was living, I think in a villa, to investigate him at a time when to be under investigation meant you were guilty.

They arrived and discovered that he had just recently died, and the townspeople had spontaneously proclaimed him a saint. So then they were faced with a decision: Are we going to smash this whole incipient movement to maintain the orthodoxy, or are we going to let it go? They let it go. But he died just in time.

Instead of being one of the great doctors of the Catholic Church, he could have been an executed heretic. The difference was paper thin in that culture. Whereas in India or China, he would have been venerated. People would have been coming to his door. But not in Western Europe.

In other words, we are barbarians. We are southern barbarians. We're not westerners, we're southerners. As the Fifth Zen Ancestor said to the young student who became the Sixth Ancestor—I think I've got my numbers right—one of the great ancestors of Chan, of Zen: This young man came from South China and went up north to the monastery of the Fifth Ancestor. The Fifth Ancestor went to check him out while he was working in the kitchen. He asked, "Where do you come from?" The young man said, "I come from the south." And the Fifth Ancestor said, "Do southern barbarians have Buddha nature?" The young man replied, "There is no north or south in Buddha nature."

I find great comfort in this, knowing that I live in the southern barbarian land. But still, we can practice.

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