Tracking Elements (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 49:04

So far we've talked about the meditation practice in pretty general terms, and today we'll start looking at particular aspects. This morning we're going to look at tracking the elements.

Where this fits in is as an aspect of mindfulness of body. The root text of the tradition is the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, and it lists four areas for mindfulness, with body as number one. So this is really important from the Buddha's perspective of what meditation is all about. It's very much a body-based activity, and it is so because the Buddha's view of human nature is essentially that we are bodies.

In the traditional European view, there's a tendency to separate out body over here, mind here, spirit there. There's a tendency to feel that what characterizes the human being is rationality, and that rationality somehow transcends the body. But for the Buddha, we are fundamentally bodies—sentient bodies. A sentient body is a body that feels, but in particular feels pain. So we come to this practice as bodies and we practice as bodies. This is very important. We're not catapulting beyond the body into some spiritual realm.

When the Buddha talks about body or about anything else, he's talking about it from the point of view of experience. When he says body, what he means is our experience of body. He's always coming at it from a first-person perspective. What he's interested in is the nature of human experience. So he's not really a philosopher. He's not speculating about the human condition so much as examining what is the experience of being human, including what is the experience of body.

When the Buddha talks about body, he talks about it sometimes in a broad sense, sometimes in a narrow sense. In a broad sense, body covers the territory of the five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. So you could say the entire experienced physical universe. The sense that we have sitting in a room with pretty subdued lighting, and it's cold, and there's the sound of the wind outside—all of this is body. But sometimes he uses body in a narrow sense of sensitivity to touch. This is the fifth of the five physical senses, and this touch can be internal or external.

For example, as I'm sitting here on my cushion, I can feel the touch of the cushion on my buttocks and the touch of the pad on my legs. This is external touch. Internal touch would be the particular physical sensations going on, the sense of lift and firmness up through the spine. In the traditions, they really focus on touch as a meditation object because it's clear, it's obvious. It's a good foundation to begin.

One important element to notice is that when the Buddha talks about body, he does not mean our concepts about body, but the direct experience of body. Normally we do not experience our body directly.

We experience it through a filter of concepts about body. For example, body image: we are obsessed about how our body appears to ourselves and to others, all of which is concept.

We also find ourselves lost in concept when we come to practice meditation. We're given some aspect of body to be aware of—it could be everyday movements, it could be breathing—and what we find is that we very easily become preoccupied and focused on our concepts about body rather than body itself. For example, what we are supposed to feel in this practice. Has anybody found themselves when they're meditating, wondering, "Is this what's supposed to happen? Is this good enough?" Well, that's not body. That's a layer of concepts about body that we're putting down, and it's getting in the way. What we're supposed to feel, what is meant to happen—these layers of concepts block us from full intimacy with actual physical sensation.

For the purposes of the practice, we want to get down to actual physical sensation. We want to get down to what is really going on in the body as distinct from any concept we have about what is going on in the body. One time in Burma, the way Sayadaw U Pandita tried to express this was that he raised a hand and he said, "What's this?"

Needless to say, the entire hall was paralyzed because everybody was thinking, "This is a trick question. What am I supposed to say?" Until eventually someone had the courage to say, "It's a hand." "Yes, a hand. Very good." And then he went, "Okay, what's this?" "A fist?" "Yes. Very good."

So everybody agreed. He established universal consent. Everybody agreed: this is hand, this is fist. And then he said, "Great. Now, you all know this. You all understand this. Completely unanimous. So you can tell me when this hand turns into a fist." He started to slowly curl his fingers. "Just tell me when the hand turns into a fist."

Now the tension rises, and at some point someone can't help themselves, and they say, "There!" "Oh, okay, there. So this is a fist, but this isn't. Yes?" And of course, immediately—discombobulation. What's the border? At what point does hand become fist?

There is no point. Hand and fist as concepts are very useful. One reason is because they have clear borders. But does physical experience itself have clear borders?

And then he offered a little meditation exercise, which we will do today, in which we are going to investigate what is the experience of my hand. So what I want you to do is sit there, just have your hand out, palm up, close your eyes, settle awareness in your body, and feel your hand. Just feel it. And ask yourself, what am I actually experiencing? And now very slowly start to curl your fingers and feel what is the experience. Don't take it for granted that you know, but really look. What is the experience? What's going on? Keep curling the fingers. And if you come to the point where the fingers touch the palm, keep curling. But what am I actually experiencing?

So what did you experience?

"Movement of—"

Movement. You notice as soon as you said "of," you were about to slide into a concept. But movement. What else?

"Temperature."

Temperature, so cold or hot.

"Tightness."

Tightness. Tension.

"Images."

Images. Mental images. So the mind throwing up concepts. Pictures.

So if we look at what we actually experience—take away the concepts, take away the "of," take away the "about"—and settle in on the actual experience itself, what we get is a whole variety of distinct sensations: movement, hardness, heat, coolness, and so on.

This is what we find beneath concepts. I have my hand, but when I really closely examine it, this hand dissolves into a series of discrete individual sensations: movement, sharpness, heat, stiffness. One way of looking at this is that the concept "this is my hand" does not survive sustained awareness. When I'm aware of something over a period of time, the concept that I have about it simply dissolves. It doesn't match anymore. And what survives are the directly experienced qualities of the experience—in this case, of the body.

For the Buddha, these are the elements, the elemental qualities of the body. Physical experience breaks up into a whole series of discrete sensations, and these sensations are the elements of physical experience. They're called elements because they are what survive sustained awareness. Strip away the concepts, and this is what is left behind.

A very common example: let's say I'm meditating on the breathing, and then suddenly I get lost in my thoughts. At that point, I am living in a world created by those thoughts. This world I'm living in is not here and now—it's somewhere else, and somewhen else, usually. But it's real to me. Then suddenly, I know that I'm thinking. And at that point—bang—that world dissolves. It vanishes. In other words, this world that I took to be real does not survive awareness. In this case, even for a moment, it's not real.

So I come back to this world where I'm sitting in the hall meditating. In this world, my left knee hurts and I really don't want to be sitting here. But let's say I'm a dutiful meditator, so I follow the meditation instructions and start to directly experience the specific sensations that make up my painful left knee. Let's say these sensations hold my attention and I stay with them. After some time, I may realise that my world of "I don't want to be sitting here" has dissolved, because it's just a concept. When I'm absorbed in

the actual physical experience, that world vanishes. It has not survived sustained awareness.

Even my left knee dissolves, because all I've got are sensations in space. The sense of it being my left knee has disappeared. So again, my left knee has not survived sustained awareness.

When we really pay attention to what's going on and we sustain that awareness over time, some things dissolve, other things remain. And what remains, even after sustained awareness—these are the elemental qualities of experience. They are the elements.

In the case of the body, they are what is really going on in the body, as distinct from what we think is going on in the body, what we imagine is going on in the body, or even what we perceive to be going on in the body. And it's in this world, the world of direct experience, that for the Buddha, insight can begin to emerge.

Does that make any sense? Here we're starting to get philosophical.

Now, here we're working in particular with touch. The Buddha says that our experience of touch—the fifth of the five physical senses—breaks down into what he calls the four great appearances, the mahābhūta. They are four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

You probably know that in the European tradition, you also have this idea of the four elements. But what makes the Buddha's approach distinctive, I think, is that for him, these elements are not aspects or parts of nature. They are qualities of experience.

So, for example, earth element is the experience of resistance, from soft through to hard. Let's say I have my hands out like this, and I bring them together. I've got no resistance—they're just moving through space. At some point they touch, and immediately there's resistance.

At first, this resistance presents as soft, but if I keep moving in the same direction, it becomes hard. So resistance from soft through to hard—this is earth element.

Air element is the experience of movement in all of its forms. Bringing my hands together, I've got predominantly air element, the sense of movement, but I've also got resistance because there's a stiffness in the hands. And then when the hands join, earth element becomes stronger.

The fire element is temperature, from cold to hot. Again, if I'm bringing my hands together, the quality of temperature I can feel in the hands—the fingers touch, and the temperature goes up. It's a bit warmer there.

And finally, we have water element, which is the most obscure of the four elements. This is the experience of liquidity and cohesion. Liquidity is wetness and dryness, and cohesion is stickiness and slipperiness—the tendency, for example, to slide on a wet floor would be a manifestation of water element.

So all we're going to do now is have an exploration of these elements as meditation objects.

Get into your meditation posture. Settle awareness in your body. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body. From there, lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders. 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 your cushion, bench, or chair. 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 if you can 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.

Now open your awareness up to the whole body, feeling your whole body. Turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel heat or warmth. 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 feel cold or coolness. Look for cold, coolness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: cold, cool.

Once more, open up your awareness so you're feeling your whole body. Now turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel wetness. 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 can find dryness. Look for dryness. If you can find it, focus on it. Name it: dry.

And again, open your awareness out to the whole body, feeling your whole body. From there, turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel movement. Look for movement. If you can find it, focus on it and name it: moving.

And now focus on those parts of the body where you find stillness. Look for stillness. If you can find it, focus on it. Name it: still.

Now open again your awareness to your whole body and open up to 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 that was a quick tour of the elements. Which one did you find, first of all, easiest to locate and most obvious—and presumably therefore easiest to stay with?

"Cold and hot."

"Hot and soft."

"Hard and soft."

Yes, cold, hot, hard, soft. Anyone else? What was the easiest one to find and, having found it, to be able to stay with?

"Wet."

Wet is quite difficult to find. Some people find difficulty with that water element. What about movement?

"Movement."

And what about stillness? Did anybody find stillness?

So beyond the elements is space, and space is still. Space meets all the elements. Space is one of the elements—it's not one of those in that list of four, but space is indeed one of the elements.

So movement was fairly obvious. Hard and soft were fairly obvious. Hard especially—it's like, "Oh my God, it's hard!"

So it was hard to stay with, difficult to remain present with. I found it, but it was sort of disappearing. It dissolved.

Most of the popular meditation objects, when you look at them, are usually based on earth element and air element. Breathing involves air and movement. Body sensation often involves hard and soft. These are, in a sense, the most common ones. Water is the most obscure. Did anybody have problems with water—wet and dry? No? So which one did you find—wet or dry? Which one did you find in the mouth? Wet.

I was going to say, I found hard, and then I found an area of my body that was tense, which was like hard. But staying with it, it changed. I found that interesting—how, in a way, I was making it hard, and it could change.

Yes, that's one of the things that happens when we start to get down beneath the level of concept: the fact of change becomes more apparent. We'll be talking more about this later. Concepts are relatively stable. The world underneath concept is much more fluid, much more dynamic.

Now, the reason why we do this exercise—you notice that it's an exercise in aim. We're aiming at hard. Not wet, not dry, not soft, not moving—hard. And then we're aiming at dry. Not wet, not movement—dry. So we're targeting awareness. We're developing aim and precision.

This is important if we're practicing for insight. If we're practicing for serenity, where all we want to do is

develop samādhi, well, that means we just want the mind and body to be still. Precision is not important. It's of no particular consequence at all. But if we're practicing for insight, precision becomes very important.

This comes out in the very word that gets translated as insight: vipassanā. Passanā means seeing, and the prefix vi denotes separation, distinctness. So seeing how this is different from that. This is the kind of perception that we need to develop to enter into the world of insight.

What becomes apparent is exactly impermanence. We stay with something in its elemental quality and it changes. This effect of change—remember we talked about one of the basic frameworks that we're working with in this practice: transitions, change, impermanence. When we drop the concept and go beneath to the actual direct experience, it turns out to be much less stable than we might at first assume it to be. It changes.

So precision and change—these are very important. And then we learn, for example, that if we want to stimulate mindfulness, if you want to maintain awareness over time, look for what is clearest and most obvious to you. Play to your strengths, basically. If something is clear and obvious, that's your meditation object, because it's easier to find and generally easier to stay with until it changes into something else.

Notice also that sometimes we would open awareness out to the whole field of the body. Sometimes we zero in on a very precise target. We open out, we zero in. This is just illustrative that there are different ways of attending. We can attend to a wide field or we can attend to a very narrow point, or anything in between. Both forms of attention are valid. Some people find one easier than the other.

Some people, if they zero in on a single point, say that they get claustrophobic, they get tight, it becomes unpleasant. Whereas when they open out, they have a sense of spaciousness, openness—it's much better. Other people say, "When I open out, I just get lost. But if I have something very specific to hang on to, I can really stay with it." So it's not that one style is better than the other, but they're different, and you find out what works best for you. And when we talk about what works best for you, we mean: what can you find and stay with over a period of time?

One thing that is very interesting and useful about the elements: when the Buddha talks about them, he talks in terms of the body. But you can use the same approach when working with mind. When you're caught up in an emotion, for example—is that emotion hot or cold? Is it hard or soft? Is it still? Is it moving? Thinking is interesting. Thinking has lots of elemental quality. Doesn't thought move a lot? And so on. So once you get used to this idea of the elements, it's very useful for working with the body, but you can then apply it to the mind as well. It seems to naturally flow into that.

You notice that sometimes the more legalistic or philosophically inclined meditators will point this out: we've been going on about dropping beneath the concepts to the elements. What's the fatal flaw in this exposition? "Elements" is another concept. "Hard" is a concept. "Soft" is a concept. So we haven't really

escaped concept at all. But what we're doing is finding concepts that are closer to the actual direct experience rather than further removed. Actually dropping concept completely is quite something. In most cases, we don't really do that, but we drop lower and lower, closer and closer to the direct experience.

So your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to play with the elements if that interests you. Whenever in the mornings we toss something out—try this, try that—we're making suggestions. If you find this interesting and useful, go for it. Play with it. If it's not, well, just forget about it.

But you notice that this is all about precision. Now that we've settled into the retreat to a certain extent, beginning to wake up perhaps, it's time to be more precise with the awareness when we can. If you try to be precise too much, you'll find there's a sense of strain and it won't be sustainable. So assess when you can be more precise and see what comes out of that.

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