Grounded in the Elements

June 10, 2025

When I first translated Ajahn Lee’s Keeping the Breath in Mind, I had a little introduction. I talked about the properties of the elements, the six properties of earth, water, wind, fire, space, consciousness. And I explained to Ajahn Fung why I did that, that these were concepts that would be very foreign to Westerners. Take me a quizzical look. Why would they be foreign? They’re immediately experienced. It’s good to stop and think, because the concepts are foreign for those of us with a Western background. But the fact that he saw it as unusual indicates something important. They’re part of our immediate experience. You don’t have to be an exotic person to sense them. It’s simply learning how to use your perceptions in a different way. For a lot of us, the body is the solid part, the earth part. The breath is something we have to force into the body. But from the Eastern point of view, the point of view of, say, Thai medicine or Indian medicine, the breath is the first thing you sense. And the shape of your breath body is not the same as the shape of your flesh body. It tends to extend outside a little bit. It has fuzzier edges. As for water, it’s the coolness you may feel. That’s one way of defining it. Another is, they say, the cohesion. I don’t know how you would directly experience cohesion, but coolness is something you can feel. And then fire is the warmth. Space would be the empty spaces in the body. In the Canon they list, say, the spaces inside your nose, inside your throat, inside your mouth. But I find it more useful to think about the space between your atoms. There’s a lot of that. That again helps to loosen up the sense we have of the body as being a solid lump with a clearly defined edge. And finally, consciousness is what’s aware of all these things. You might ask, where is your consciousness? It’s in all of it. It’s just that there’s part of the mind that tends to be the focal part, the part where you’re paying closest attention. That tends to be in one spot. Or you can make it in several spots at once. Or you can train it to be fully throughout the body. Which is one of the things we’re trying to do here, is we’re trying to get the mind into a really solid state of concentration. It’s where breath permeates everything. Think of breath as the first thing you experience. What is the first thing you experience in your body? How you feel from within. It’s kind of liquid, and it’s kind of moving, and it’s kind of vague. It’s only when we tense it up that the body becomes very clearly defined. And you have to do that to some extent, say, when you’re walking or doing any other physical task. But when you’re sitting still, you can allow things to be a little bit more loosely defined. And that takes a lot of the tension away. When you take a good long breath in, where do you feel the movement? And how does the long breathing feel? Try to sensitize yourself to how you feel the body from within. Because a lot of our Western background desensitizes us to just that. We have to pay more attention to concepts, things that are far away. Which means we tend to blot out large parts of our awareness of the body. Or different parts of our awareness of the body get converted into thoughts about this, that, or the other thought world. When we go into a thought world, it’s like a control key on a computer. You press the control key, and “C” doesn’t mean “see” anymore. It means “copy.” “X” doesn’t mean “axe.” It means “cut.” “S” doesn’t mean “ass.” It means “save.” In the same way, certain sensations in the body mean certain things to you, because you associate them with different thoughts. Here we’re trying to get back to the pre-association time, or pre-association stating a body, just the body, as a body in and of itself. This is our frame of reference. And thinking about it in terms of these elements is a very useful way of getting in touch with that. Think about being aware of your hands, and the awareness is in your hands. It’s not up in your head, looking down at the hands. The awareness is there in the hands. The same with your feet, the legs, every part of the body. You want to fully inhabit this space you have here. It is your space. Nobody else can experience it the way you do. Someone else could open you up with a knife, inside your body, but it still wouldn’t be the same as the way you experience your body from within. So use this as your grounding, because this is where you’re fully in the present. For the mind to go off into the past or the future, it requires that it shrinks down. So much as if going to the past or the future required going into a little tube. And if your awareness is too large in the present moment, it’s not going to go down the tube. So expand, spread out into the body right here. And the question is, which of the elements is going to be most prominent for the time being? Stick with the breath. There’ll be times when you have a fever and you’re warm, or you have a chill and you feel cold, or it feels heavy. And here’s where you can play with your perceptions. If things are too hot outside, you don’t want to focus on the heat inside the body. Ask yourself, where in the body is the coolest spot? Or when things are cold outside, where is the warmest spot in the body? Focus there. And then think of that warmth spreading through the body. If you’re feeling lightheaded, think about earth. In fact, this body has its solid aspect. Or if you’re feeling dull and down, think of the breath again. The breath of the different elements is the one that you can adjust the most quickly and the most easily. It’s one of the reasons why we focus on it. And it’s most responsive to the mind. It’s through the breath that the mind can exert control over the body, make it move. And it’s through the breath that the mind experiences the body. Without the breath, you’d be going separate ways. So think of the breath as primary. And it’s everywhere. It’s all around your body. Wherever you are in the body, think of the breath surrounding you. And that puts you in the present, not hovering around the present someplace else. So these are useful ways of perceiving. We may not buy into the medicine that goes behind the theory, saying that when you have a fever, you need to have something cooling. Or when you have certain kinds of pains that are associated with the breath energy, you need a breath medicine or an earth medicine. But you can take this as your way of experiencing the body directly. It’s when the exotic nature of that analysis goes away and you realize this is how you directly experience the body. It’s a perfectly legitimate way of doing it. There’s nothing esoteric about it. I remember reading someone’s criticism of the book Mind, Life, Fire and Bound. It talks about the fire element penetrating everything. Starting a fire means to aggravate the fire element. It clings to its fuel. And when it goes out, it lets go. It goes back to its latent state. And someone objected to that. That’s a very exotic way of looking at it. The people back in those days, they didn’t look at it that way. In any way, it was the Brahmins who looked at it that way. The criticism was very incoherent. But it’s based on the idea that the way we in the West perceive things is the way things really are. And everybody else is strange. And it’s good to get out of that mindset to realize that a lot of our Western notions are pretty strange. And we have been divorced from our bodies, alienated from our bodies, by our education. So what we need is a re-education. How things are experienced directly. And use this vocabulary because it’s useful vocabulary. It’s not the only one you can use to describe how you experience the body. But it has its uses. And it’s not some exotic screen that’s getting in the way, getting between you and the body. It’s a way of talking about sensations in the body that if you didn’t have this vocabulary, you wouldn’t be able to talk about them. It’s the same as being a professional taster, a professional scent expert. These people have to learn very, very precise vocabularies to describe subtle differences in tastes and in smells. In the same way, this vocabulary of the six elements, or the six properties, helps make you sensitive to things that you just might have brushed past. So see what happens when you hold that perception in mind. The breath is the first thing you experience in your body. You’re not forcing the breath into the solid parts of the body. You’re opening up all the different breath energies in the body so they can be interconnected. And you bring in the air from outside. One way you could say that you bring in energy from outside. But you could also say it’s because of the energy you already have inside that the air comes in and out. When you think of the energy originating in here, then you find yourself less hungry for a breath. And you realize that when you’re feeling starved of breath energy, you might want to focus on just loosening things up inside. So the breath has more freedom to flow. Learn how to use these concepts because they give you handles on things inside your body that you wouldn’t have otherwise. Learn to be at home with them.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2025/250610_Grounded_in_the_Elements.mp3>