

Wind, Fire, Water, Earth, Space

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A while back, I was reading a piece: someone complaining about the idea of translating the word *kusala* as skillful, saying that in Western ethical thought the idea of skillfulness plays no role, so why should we introduce it when we talk about Buddhism?

That's a very narrow attitude, as if whatever Buddhism has to offer has to go through our filter first before we'll accept it. And we're unwilling to have our horizons expanded.

Actually, introducing the idea of skillfulness to ethics would be a very useful thing—a very skillful thing—because it makes the point that, on the one hand, mere good intentions are not enough. They have to be skillful to get genuinely good results. On the other hand, the idea of skillfulness emphasizes the extent to which you can learn from your actions and apply what you've learned to future actions.

This is just one of the many ways in which Buddhism introduces a lot of concepts that may seem foreign to us at first, but the more you get to live with the concepts, the more you realize that they deal with your direct experience, and they're very useful, especially for the purposes that the Buddha assigns to all of his teachings, which are to understand suffering and stress and to use that understanding to put an end to them.

Another Buddhist concept that's very often underestimated is the concept of property, *dhatu* in Pali, sometimes here translated as element. People tend to think of the medieval elements when they hear that, something we've outgrown in the West. But it's very useful when you're meditating to think in terms of these properties. In English, we have the word proprioception, which means your sense of the body as felt from within. And this where the properties are really useful, because they give us a framework for dividing that sense of the body from within into categories. There's breath or wind, which is a sense of energy; the fire, which is a sense of warmth; liquid, which is a sense of coolness; and then earth, which is a sense of solidity. And as you sit here inhabiting your body, it's useful to have a sense of these different aspects of what you're feeling. It's good for concentration, good for discernment.

In terms of concentration, there's that nice passage where the Buddha gives instructions to Rahula, even before Rahula starts doing breath meditation, saying, "Make your mind like earth," he says. Earth doesn't get disturbed by nice things or

unpleasant things. You can throw garbage on earth, and earth doesn't react. This is a good image to hold in mind when you're going through a difficult situation. People are saying things you don't want to hear or doing things you don't want to see done, and your mind is reacting. Ask yourself: Is the earth part of your body reacting? Are the bones reacting? The bones are not. Try to get a sense of your bones, and then make your awareness like the bones—like that sense of solidity. That way you find that you can endure things that otherwise you wouldn't be able to endure. You learn a lesson from earth.

These properties are also useful as you're trying to settle down and gain a sense of well-being in the body, especially with the breath. You can think of the breath as a whole-body process. It makes the breath a much better object for meditation than just having it in one spot—say, at the nose, or just the air coming in and out that can be felt at the nose or the lips. After all, we're trying to develop a state of full-body awareness in our concentration, and it's good to have an object to focus on that does extend throughout the body. So when they talk about “singleness of preoccupation,” it's single in both senses: single in the sense that it's the one thing you're focusing on, and single in the sense that it's a single sensation filling the body.

Of the various elements, the breath is the easiest to manipulate, the easiest to nudge into the different directions to adjust and get it so it's just right, feeling good coming in, feeling good going out. The breath, after all, is your first experience of the body. We have a tendency to think that the solidity of the body is there first in our awareness, and then the breath comes in afterwards. But no, the breath is what enables you to sense the body to begin with. It's the medium through which we can sense the other properties of the body. If it weren't for the energy going through the nerves, going through the blood vessels, you wouldn't be sensing the body at all.

So breath is there first, and the other properties come later. As you get a sense of the breath, you can focus on those properties, and you can get them into balance, too. Ajaan Fuang would often have his students, as soon as the breath calmed down and was very still in the body, focus first on fire, the warmth in the body. Where in the body is the warmest spot right now? Focus on that, and see if you can magnify it, both in the sense of making it stronger and then letting it spread throughout the body the same way that you've let the breath spread.

If things get too warm, you can think of water. Water's cooling. Again, where's the coolest spot in the body? Focus on that, and then let that sense of coolness spread. Then try to balance out the two so that it feels just right—not too hot, not too cold, just like Goldilocks and the porridge.

Then you can focus on earth, the sense of solidity in the body. Some people really enjoy this because it gives a sense of being grounded in the meditation. Other people find it oppressive. When things get very solid, they feel like they can't breathe. So if it feels too solid, think of mixing the breath and the earth. Those are the two pairs. Water and fire make one pair; and breath and earth make the other pair. Try to get things into balance. In this way, you make the body a much more comfortable place to settle down.

And it's good for your health when you get a sense of these properties from inside. When the body begins to feel out of balance, you can question yourself: Okay, which property is excessive and which one is weak? The Buddha's theory of properties holds that certain properties get provoked. When the wind property is provoked outside, for example, there are windstorms. When the water property is provoked, there are floods. When the fire property is provoked, fires start and then spread.

And you find that you can provoke the same things in the body, for good or ill. Often in a lot of illnesses, the sense of the body is not balanced. Even though Western doctors might say that it's due to this or that chemical imbalance, you feel the imbalance in the properties directly. You don't feel chemicals. You don't feel oxygen. But you do feel these properties. And if you're sensitive to them and learn how to strengthen ones that are weak, you can bring things back into balance. When you're feeling lightheaded, think of earth. Think of something that grounds you and keeps you next to the earth. When the body's feeling sluggish, when you're feeling depressed, try to think more of breath to leaven the sense of the body. And of course, when you're feeling too cold or too hot, you can think of the opposite property to bring things back into balance.

Now, there are limitations on what you can do with this: one, simply based on the condition of the body and two, based on the power of your concentration. But as you get a sense of the body as it's felt from the inside, you find that you have a handle on some of these things. You have some control over how your body's going to feel.

This is where the analysis into properties is helpful for insight. You see the power of perception. Just hold in mind the perception of warmth, and things will warm up. And the more confidence, or what they call assurance, that you give to that perception of warmth, the stronger the effect is going to be. These are potentials that you can see in action: the extent to which your directed thought, your evaluation, your perceptions really do have an impact on your feelings and how you experience the body right now.

And of course, these perceptions also help to depersonalize things. This body is just a lump of elements. It's just a lump of properties, the same properties as everybody else's bodies. The image the Buddha gives is of a butcher sitting at a crossroads, cutting up a cow. Of course, as you cut up the cow, the perception of "cow" goes away, and it's replaced by the perception of meat, or bones, or the other organs. In the same way, as you get a sense of the body in terms of its properties, the sense of its being "my body" gets replaced simply by, "Oh, there's earth; there's water; there's wind; there's fire." Around it is space. Then there's consciousness that knows these things. All of these things can be seen as impersonal properties.

Space and consciousness are useful for getting beyond the form jhanas into the formless states. In other words, once you've got the breath still and you've got the other elements in balance, try to maintain that sense of being balanced right here. You'll notice that because the breath energy isn't flowing in and out, the sense of the boundaries of the body fades away. Then you see what's still holding everything together, what's still holding your sense that there *is* a body here, is simply the mental label of form. If you drop that mental label, you have a sense that the body's just a mist, like little dots of water in a cloud. The sense of boundary gets very fuzzy. That's when you focus in on the space between the dots, and that takes you into space, the first of the formless states.

This, again, helps both with your concentration and with your insight: the realization that an awful lot of your perception of reality is based on the mental labels you're carrying around. And you have the option of dropping them, replacing them with other labels: in this case, the sense of infinite space. Space is good for when things in the body just can't be brought into balance. Things feel out of whack, and nothing you can do seems to get them back into whack. So you can go to space and just hang out there for a while.

I think I've told you the story of Ajaan Fuang's student who had a voice in her meditation one night, saying she was going to die that night. And sure enough, her body started to feel as if it was all going to fall apart. She said it was like a house on fire. No place in the body she went to offered her any comfort at all. But then she thought of space. So she went to space, hung out there for a while, and then things in the body returned to normal. So of course she didn't die, and that's how she lived to tell about it.

It's a good option to keep in mind when things in the body are not going well. Even before you get to the point where you can hold on to these perceptions to the point of really being thoroughly in, say, the formless attainment of infinite space, just having that perception in mind, you're realizing there is a part of your

awareness here that does correspond to space. It's the same as with the bones, with the earth. When you want to make the mind be like earth, you just get in touch with whatever earthiness you can feel inside the body. It helps give a sense of solidity to your awareness. In the same way, space is very useful. You think of things just going through space, and nothing affects the space. Space permeates everything. It goes through atoms out in all directions.

There's a passage where Moggallana is approached by some women who want to tempt him, and he says it's like trying to paint pictures on space. There's no surface. You can use the same image in your mind when difficult things are happening, difficult things are being said, being done. They can just go right through you without leaving any trace. It's a good perception to have in mind to replace your ordinary perceptions of being struck and offended by the words and having to react to the words. Space doesn't react.

So these perceptions are useful in lots of ways. It's good to familiarize yourself with them and realize that holding on to some of these new concepts opens up entire new dimensions in your experience and in your ability to deal skillfully with all kinds of issues.

This is one of the reasons it's good to be open to new concepts, new ways of looking at things, and not be narrowly focused on just what comes from our original culture. If that were our attitude, we wouldn't have many opportunities at all to really get to know the potentials within the body and within the mind. And we'd be depriving ourselves of a lot of the tools that are really, really useful for understanding how we create suffering and understanding how to bring that suffering to an end.