FOUR ELEMENTS

MEDITATION

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Outline

1. Theory & to comprehend the conceptual roots.

2. Method & to grasp the steps.

3. Practical Aspects & to behold how it applies in reality.

4. Personal Reflections & sharing my own insights.

The Ultimate End of the Practice

- Cultivates mindfulness (sati) and insight (vipassanā) by analysing the body as mere elements.
- Aims to dismantle the illusion of a permanent self (atta), fostering understanding of non-self (anatta).
- Supports liberation by realising the three characteristics: impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and non-self (anatta).

Philosophical Grounding

- Derived from the Buddha’s teaching that all phenomena are composed of 4 primary elements: earth, water, fire, air.
- The body is not a unified ‘self’ but a temporary aggregation of these impersonal elements.
- Aligns with satipaṭṭhāna (body contemplation) to develop wisdom (paññā) and reduce attachment.

Four Elements & Key Concepts

- Earth - represents solidity and structure (bones, muscles).
- Water - embodies fluidity and cohesion (blood, sweat).
- Fire - reflects heat and transformation (body warmth, digestion).
- Air - captures movement and pressure (breath, bodily motion).

- The elements are not unique to the individual but UNIVERSAL; they exist in all matter, breaking the notion of personal identity)
- Three Kinds of Compactness (ghana): the detailed method strives to dissolve perceived solidity, continuity, and cohesion of the body, revealing rūpa kalāpas (material particles).
- Access Concentration (upacāra-samādhi): a focused state achieved by discerning elements, enabling deeper insight into their impermanent nature.

Function in Vipassanā

- Examining elements leads to citta-visuddhi (purification of mind) and diṭṭhi-visuddhi (purification of view).
- Practitioners discern rūpa kalāpas and the space element to understand the body’s true nature, advancing toward liberation.
- Serves as a platform for bare-insight meditators, with access concentration as a resting point during Vipassanā practice.

Elaborating on 2 Methods

Unveiled in the Pāli texts, such as the Visuddhimagga and the Mahàsatipaññhàna Sutta

'Brief Method' or 'Coincise Method'
(Buddha taught the brief method in the Mahàsatipaññhàna Sutta)

'A bhikkhu reviews this very body however it be positioned or placed as consisting of just elements thus, "There are in this body just the earth-element, the water-element, the fire-element, and the air-element.'

Within this method the meditator reflects on the body as made up of earth (solidity), water (fluidity), fire (heat), and air (movement). It encompass observing these elements in a general way, without detailed analysis, during sitting meditation or daily activities (accessible for beginners with the focus on quick, intuitive awareness rather than deep investigation). It nurtures mindfulness by highlighting the body's impermanent and impersonal nature.

'Detailed Method' or 'In-Depth Metodh'
((The Visuddhimagga (Ch.XI, para. 41–43))

'…one… should go into solitary retreat. Then he should advert to his entire material body, and discern the elements…: 'In this body what is hard or rough is the earth-element, what is flowing or cohesion is the water-element, what is maturing (ripening) or heat is the fire-element, what is pushing or supporting is the air-element,' and he should… review it again and again as 'earth-element, water-element, fire-element, air-element,' that is to say, as mere elements, not a being, and soulless. …concentration arises in him, which is… reinforced by understanding that illuminates the classification of the elements… Or alternatively… resolve each of these [bodily parts], separating them out by the hand of knowledge, and then discern…: 'In these what is hardness…'

By and large, it requires systematically analysing the body's components, like bones and flesh, and discerning their elemental qualities (hardness, fluidity, heat, movement) through repeated, focused contemplation in a solitary retreat.

Brief Method

Straightforward, ideal for beginners or daily mindfulness. Practitioners reflect on the body as a combination of four fundamental elements:

- Earth: represents firmness and solidity, like bones, muscles, or skin.
- Water: embodies fluidity and cohesion, seen in fluids like blood or sweat.
- Fire: reflects warmth and energy, such as body heat or metabolic processes.
- Air: captures movement and pressure, like breath or bodily motion.

The meditator observes these elements within their body, recognising them as transient and not constituting a ‘self.’ The practice involves observing that the body is merely a combination of these elements, which are impermanent (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha), and non-self (anatta). This practice can be done during sitting meditation or woven into daily activities, emphasizing simplicity over detailed analysis.

Detailed Method

Step 1. Breaking down 12 elements (identifying specific body components tied to each element)

- *Earth: hardness, roughness, heaviness, softness, smoothness, lightness.*
- *Water: flowing, cohesion.*
- *Fire: heat, coldness.*
- *Air: supporting, pushing.*

Step 2. Exploring element qualities

The meditator contemplates the unique traits of each element, such as earth's rigidity, water's flow, fire's heat, or air's dynamism, to deepen their understanding.

Step 3. Attention to the excess

'When you can discern 12 characteristics clearly throughout the body, from head to feet, you should continue to discern them again and again in this same order. While practising in this way, the elements will for some meditators not be balanced, some elements may become excessive and unbearable. If this occurs, you should pay more attention to the quality opposite the one that is in excess, and continue to develop concentration in that way.'

Detailed Method

Step 4. After attaining the skill of discernment

'After becoming skilled in the discernment of the 12 characteristics in the whole body you should note the first six together at one glance as the earth-element, the next two together at one glance as the water-element, the next two as the fire-element, and the last two as the air-element.'

Step 6. Emergence of Light

- Initial grey, smoke-like light appears.
- With continued discernment, light becomes whiter (like cotton wool), then bright white (like clouds).
- Body appears as a white form.

Step 5. Developing concentration

'By giving attention in 10 ways: in order, not too fast, not too slow, warding off distractions, going beyond the concept, discarding what is not clear, discerning the characteristics, and developing according to the Adhicitta Sutta, Anuttara- sãtibhàva Sutta, and Bojjhaïga Sutta.'

Step 7. Transperent Materiality

- Discern elements in the white form; it becomes transparent, like ice or glass.
- This reveals the five transparent-elements (pasāda): eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body.
- Body transparent-element (kāya-pasāda) is found throughout the body, seen as a transparent lump.

Detailed Method

Step 8. Dissecting Compactness

- Discern elements in the transparent lump; it sparkles and emits light.
- Sustained focus achieves access concentration.
- Discern the space-element in the transparent form; it breaks into rūpa kalāpas (small particles).

Step 9. Purification Stages

- *Reaching rūpa kalāpas marks citta-visuddhi (purification of mind).*
- *Proceed to diṭṭhi-visuddhi (purification of view) by analyzing rūpa kalāpas.*

Step 10. Resting in Access Concentration

- Access concentration serves as a resting place for bare-insight meditators, unlike jhāna for samatha practitioners.
- Retreat to this state during Vipassanā fatigue, similar to warriors resting in a fort (the Dvedhàvitakka Sutta of Majjhima Nikàya).
- Resting rejuvenates meditators for continued Vipassanā practice.

Preparation

- Finding a quiet, secluded space for focused practice, ideally a retreat environment.
- Sit cross-legged or comfortably, keeping the body erect to maintain alertness.
- Mindset (approach with determination to discern elements without attachment, aiming for insight).

Execution in Practice

- Speaking on brief method, contemplate earth (hardness), water (flowing), fire (heat), and air (pushing) across the body, noting them as impersonal elements).
- Regarding the detailed method, systematically discern 12 characteristics (e.g., hardness, roughness, cohesion) in all body parts, progressing from head to feet.
- How to claim progression? Focus on elements until light appears (grey to white to transparent), revealing rūpa kalāpas (material particles), leading to access concentration.

Challenges

- When struggling to discern subtle characteristics like cohesion or flowing, it indicates the lack of repeated practice.
- To handle a wandering mind - maintain focus on elements to ward off distractions.
- Perceiving the body as solid (ghana) hinders seeing rūpa kalāpas.

Tangible Benefits

- Enhanced Mindfulness (sharpens awareness of the body's elemental nature, reducing self-identification)
- Mental Clarity (access concentration provides calm, a 'resting place' for Vipassanā)
- Insight Progress (discerning rūpa kalāpas fos citta-visuddhi (mind purification) and diṭṭhi-visuddhi (view purification))

Practical Tips

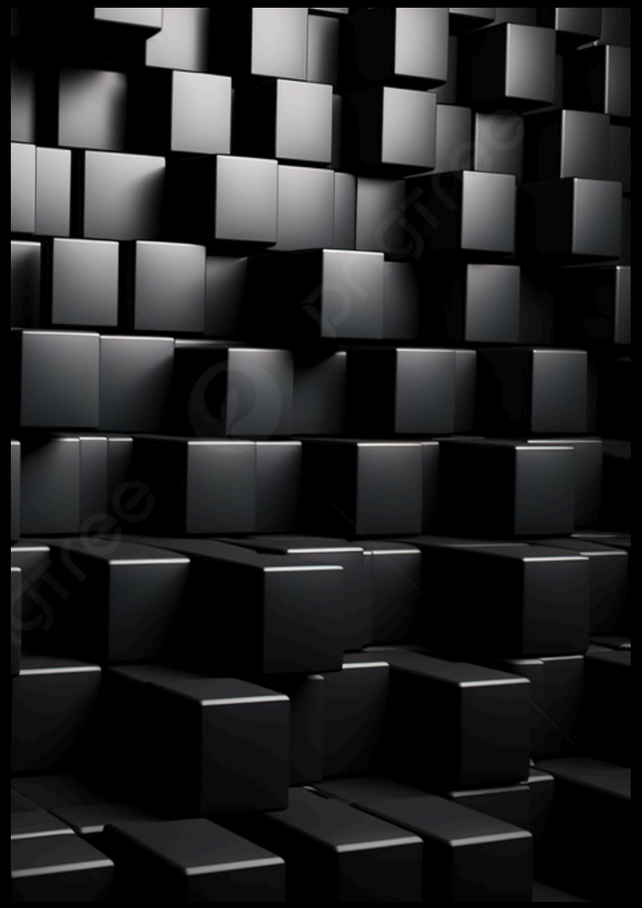
- To commence with brief sessions (10–15 minutes), focusing on one characteristic (e.g., pushing) before combining all 12.
- Balance Elements (if one characteristic dominates (e.g., flowing), emphasise its opposite (e.g., cohesion))
- Patience (to navigate phenomena like light or subtle elements, as they require not only time but consequent practice).

First Steps

- Drawn to Pa-Auk's method (p. 19), I felt a mix of excitement and doubt about dissecting my body into elements.
- Sat in my quiet corner at home, eager to uncover what "earth, water, fire, air" really meant.

Barriers

- Early on, I got stuck on subtle qualities like cohesion — my mind kept latching onto hardness instead.
- Consequently, distractions crept in; my thoughts wandered to daily worries, testing my resolve to stay focused.



Key Moments

- After I believe 3 days of practice - it seems or I want to believe - I could grasp a faint grey light shifting to white, hinting at deeper focus.
- Catching glimpses of rūpa kalāpas was surprising—it made me question if my body is really, say, ‘solid’.

Emerging Thoughts

- I’m starting to see my body as just elements, which makes “self” feel less fixed, though - let me be frank to the end - it’s hard to fully grasp.
- Moments of calm after focusing for 20+ minutes feel refreshing, but - as of now - I wonder how deep this can go.

Conclusions as of now...

- Balancing elements like flowing and cohesion is really tricky, whereas I’m learning to be patient with the process .
- This practice shifts how I view myself, but I’m still exploring what it means for my mundane life.

References

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THANK YOU

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