



# WISDOM OF THE ELEMENTS



*Bhikkhu Dhammānanda*



The wisdom of the elements  
And their almost sacred dance  
Their nature, danger, usefulness,  
The need for them for truthfulness  
This all here is sought to get explored  
And to an ancient depth restored.

# Wisdom of the elements

The earth the solid element,  
through form and weight we comprehend.

While flowing, depth and clearness,  
show us water's nearness.

Heat, or radiance, or a light,  
shows that fire is alight.

And by air, the subtlest element,  
we change and movement comprehend

From Greece, to Native America, from Egypt to India, the idea of four fundamental elements which form the foundation for understanding the natural world, is so universal, that a study of them might be an not unrewarding pursuit.

So what are these four elements, and why are they so universal an idea?

The four elements are: earth, water, fire and air. (In Pali: pathavi, apo, tejo and vājo).

But they actually do not primarily refer to these elements in nature, they do not primarily refer to the earth under your feet, or the water in a pond, or the fire, that you see in a campfire, or the air that you feel when

the wind blows into your face, although these are the most obvious representations of these elements. But rather these elements are the perhaps first and most fundamental system for classifying pretty much everything.

So even in regard to the material universe, and as I will show later, these four elements are far from being limited only to the world of matter.

But even just in relation to the world of matter, anything which can be experienced as solid, as possessing shape and as having weight, is a representation of the earth element. Anything that is experienced as liquid, as clearness or as depth is part of the water element. All forms of heat, of radiation and light are expressions of the fire element. While all manifestations of change or fluctuation, or of movement and anything which is subtle, belongs to the air element.

Try to find something in your experience of the material world, which does not squarely fit into that classification, and you will realise how comprehensive the idea of the elements is.

Nevertheless, as has been recognised even by science by now, the universe is not just material. So anything that we recognise as immaterial, mental, emotional and the like too can be classified with the scheme of the four elements.

So you may find that emotions have been quite universally attributed to the water element. That is so, because on the one hand side you find that in emotions

your sense-experiences which are always quite fractured (and which by the way are part of the earth element) somewhat converge in one singular element, like the moon and the trees and the stars all coming together on the surface of a lake...and all somewhat being bent by the surface of the lake.

While on the other hand, many emotions also possess water-like qualities, so you can have turbulent emotions, calm emotions, deep emotions and so on. So, if you reflect on it, there is quite an intriguing similarity between the qualities of emotions and that of water.

Nevertheless, many mind states which we in modern times call emotions too, actually can be also quite fiery, then we usually refer to them as passions. So, things like anger, rage, and even love, definitely have quite fiery qualities to them, which is why we even say "burning with love" or "burning with hate".

Thinking on the other hand, as another immaterial phenomenon, is quite different. Thinking, you may have guessed it, is more akin to the air element. One reason being that in thinking there is usually a certain forward movement present, that's at least how it should be. So if you find that your thinking does not possess this quality, you may consider that your thinking might not be thinking after all. Perhaps it is only a noisy emotion.

As to the earth element, we have already mentioned it, that all sense-experiences are part of it. But actually, not only sense-experiences, because there is one phenomenon, perhaps in a certain sense, the most

immaterial of all, which yet should be properly regarded as belonging to the earth element. And that is the idea.

And why?, because an idea can be the most lasting and enduring of all phenomena. (Even it not always is.) It is in fact, in a certain sense matter made divine.

And having opened up the subject of the divine, in many cultures of the past, the elements actually were often attributed to deities.

So you can find in many cultures,

- An earth deity (Gaya [Greek], Pathavi [Hindu]),
- A water deity (Poseidon and Varuna, or Ganga )
- A fire deity (Hephaestus, Agni), and
- An Air or Wind deity (Aeolus, Vayu).

And in Buddhism you have the four great (divine) Kings, who are regarded as the protectors of the world, each of whom has a certain of the four elements attributed to him.

So you have:

- Dhātaraṭṭho (King of the East) - who is Associated with the element of air or wind.
- Virūḷhako (King of the South) - who is Associated with the element of fire.

- Virūpakkho (King of the West) - who is Associated with the element of water. And
- Kuvero (King of the North) - who is Associated with the element of earth.

Of course there are many other areas in which the elements can be, and are used. For example, they are often used to delineate personality traits, to categorise the colours of the colour spectrum and much more, but in here I would like to focus first and foremost on how we can use an understanding of these elements in meditation practice, and how to deliberately meditate on them.

## Meditation

To meditate on the four elements as with any other subject, it can indeed be helpful to become so devoted to them as if they were a god, or as if they were a pathway to communicate with a god..

Meditation means "to become familiar with", and in order to become familiar with the four elements, one has to, as often as possible, use whatever one experiences as a means to understand the four elements.

So, let's imagine you are meditating. What are you experiencing?

You are restless? That's an excess of the air element, recognising that, pay attention to anything in your field of perception with earthy qualities. You feel heavy or stagnant? That's an excess of earth element. So let whatever wind element you feel, move you, or at least stimulate your mind.

Then you might feel calm, that often is a good mixture between water and earth element. But is there also brightness? If not, you have to see to it that you get some fire also from somewhere.

Then you might off and on hear a sound from somewhere around you, that might, if you are not mindful, stir up again some undue wind element in you. But if you are devoted to your elements meditation, you should instead try to know it. Try to find out, whether that sound, which obviously is primarily a manifestation of the air element, has some other elemental qualities to it. Is it smooth (perhaps water) or rough (earth), painful (fire) or pleasant (generally water).

And if you play this game for long enough, you will see that the whole process is indeed a process of inner alchemy. Of transforming base elements into something valuable and refined.

If you ever get somewhere with it, try it out. See how people respond or react to you after you had some good meditation, and compare it with how your life



usually runs when you are just an old sluggard or a perpetually restless creature, or whatever else is your general weakness.

## The Elements Mantra

On the other hand side, because human life is as it is quite an imperfect matter, if you really want to progress with something, you have to find ways to do it continuously, even if it is not always fun. And one way of doing that, especially when you don't have the right conditions to make elaborate investigations, is to recite the name of the elements as a mantra. So especially during your daily life, you could for example, recite in your mind, or if you won't disturb anybody around you, even verbally:

earth, water, fire, wind (or air),...earth, water, fire, wind (or air)...and so on.

And when you get some more space in your mind, to expand that, for example with the qualities that you remember each element possess... Which would be something like : solid, shape and weight, is earth...solid, shape and weight, is earth...solid, shape and weight, is earth...

And then you go on with the water element, but you might want to try to make it somewhat sound nice to yourself, for example you can then say...

...flowing, depth and clearness, show us water's nearness,

...heat, or radiance, or a light, shows that fire is alight,  
And by air, the subtlest element, we change and movement comprehend...

And then you might start off again with the earth element, perhaps, this time like:

The earth the solid element,  
through form and weight we comprehend.

While flowing, depth and clearness,  
show us water's nearness.

Heat, or radiance, or a light,  
shows that fire is alight.

And by air, the subtlest element,  
we change and movement comprehend

And then again from the start.. Don't worry if you off and on muddle up a line, it is more important to keep going the flow of it This flow in a sense actually constitutes the Jhāna factor of sustainment, although in this case it is more on the words than on the experience of the elements itself.

So a mantra, principally could end up becoming a whole hymn to the elements, an experience which

could catapult you into a state of samādhi...something you might be aiming for in your meditation.

Hence, once you really become familiar with these four elements, you will always have something to do, or something new to discover. Or a way for making spiritual, that is, meditation kamma.

And whenever doing that, your mind becomes particularly spacious; you might be able to harness even a small feeling of flowing or depth inside your body to aid you in becoming like a whole ocean. In turn, once your mind can become like an ocean, you will have the appropriate space to make any problem, however big, look tiny in relation to your potential to solve it.

Of course you can only do that, if you become good at triggering an appropriate chain of associations. And that is precisely what you will learn by playing with, and by combining the elements.

## **Evoking the qualities of the Elements / Meditation on only one element**

So these are just a few ways for using the four elements for your spiritual practice. Of course you can also for example deliberately seat yourself in front of a fire (personally I believe only few people will be able to gain good concentration by focussing merely on a candle, primarily because that gets usually boring quite quickly)...or you can put a water bowl in front of you to

contemplate only water, or you go to a mountain top, to contemplate the wind or even the earth element.

This sort of practice you will usually do to evoke some particular quality from one particular element. Either because you are naturally drawn to it, or because you want to balance out some weakness.

For example you might feel that you have a certain weakness of character, like sluggishness for example, then you might want to try to meditate on the earth element, with its qualities of firmness and stability. Or you might want to become more intelligent, then meditating on the air element might be the choice for you. Perhaps you would there associate it with a certain forward movement of your mind, which corresponds to the air element in that it is the most etheric part of you. Or you may crave the will power represented by the fire element, or the kindness, compassion, or even just flexibility of the water element.

Of course, once you understand the qualities of samādhi, you will understand that that state is where all your potential to solve all your problems lies, and that it doesn't really matter with what element or subject you attain it.

## Philosophy

Then again you could use the four elements to contemplate very deep philosophical themes, or at the very least you can use them to start off with such

contemplation. And for that, different topics will be most naturally be regarded in relation to usually only one of the elements.

## **Fire**

For example in Buddhism you have a strong emphasis on understanding impermanence. Now what is meant by impermanence, is , that all conditioned things, both material and immaterial, which includes your body and your mind, some day will come to an end. Which in terms of the four elements means, that one day they will fall prey to the nature of the fire element. Because the fire element is the element which stands for destruction.

Of course, fire is not the only element with the potency to destroy, but it is the most potent element for destruction.

Think about it, yes you can destroy a compound thing through water, somewhat diluting it, but for most compound things it (this) will be a slow process. Also you can drive a composition apart, using the force of the wind element, but usually the composite parts are still in existence, only further apart. A similar thing applies when you break a solid thing with another solid thing. But with fire it is different. Fire can so to say fully extinguish an existing thing...turning it into nothingness.

Of course with living things, things are more complex. Living things are perfect systems of equilibrium of the

elements. Either an excess or an excessive diminution of any element will lead to death. But still, what do you do to preserve a living thing for longer? You freeze it, diminishing the fire element to an absolute minimum. That's why you put your food in the fridge or freezer to make it last longer. That is why perhaps some people allow their body to be frozen, in the hope of witnessing some far future.

So if you want to contemplate impermanence, and don't know where to start, you might consider starting with looking at things around you that have been half burned, or if you live in a country with hot climate, you can look at the destructive effects of the heat of the sun on the vegetation around you.

On the other hand, if you want to start straight away within yourself, sit until your body becomes a little hot, and look for signs of destruction in some area of your body... Think about how quickly the cells of your body can get destroyed just by a little increase in your body's temperature. And then try to take that consideration up to the destruction of the whole universe. But do it slowly and in a meaningful manner. Perhaps after having thoroughly considered about your own impermanence and liability to destruction, think about the people you hold dear, and perhaps the things you have attachments towards.

Of course you don't need to make this only a negative contemplation, you can also consider about unfortunate

circumstances, how they after some period of burning you, in the end will also come to an end.

## **Earth**

But then sometimes in Buddhism especially, we often forget, that there are also things, which are lasting. The Buddha repeatedly stated, that whether a Buddha arises in this world or not, the Dhamma is always the same (Dhammatitikko). The Dhamma being the eternal law by which beings attain to perfection.<sup>1</sup>

So universal laws are stable. And to some degree the universal laws in the cosmos correspond to universal ideas in humanity (or the other way around). If you look at human history, or do inter-religious studies, you will find that there are certain universal ideas, which perhaps outwardly change over time, but which essentially remain the same. One example being exactly this consideration of the four elements, which even in modern times is represented by the four states of matter (solid, liquid, gaseous, and plasma).

So the Dhamma is stable and timeless (akāliko). And that is represented by the earth element. Hence, if you want to contemplate this fact of stability, and lastingness, you can for example begin by focussing outwardly—perhaps by looking at a rock.

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<sup>1</sup> *tiṭṭhati* Sk. *sthiti*, Gr. *στάσις*, Lat. *statio* (cp. *stationary*), stability, steadfastness; duration, continuance, immobility; persistence

However, for some people, it might be more impressive to consider big monuments, such as the giant gothic cathedrals in Europe, some of which have stood for hundreds of years, or the old Pagodas or temples around the world, or even the pyramids of Egypt. If you have ever seen these monuments either directly or in pictures and felt inspired by their sight, then you can use that as a starting point. Others might find more inspiration by looking at giant trees, etc. Whatever it is that you begin focussing on, try to contemplate the fact that some things are of a more lasting nature than others. And then equally try to extend that contemplation, until it encompasses the whole universe.

Alternatively, you can also begin by focussing on certain things within yourself that appear more lasting than the rest of your body, such as your teeth, bones, and the nails on your fingers and feet. These, in a natural setting, will still be there long after your last breath is gone, long after the fire in your body is gone, long after all liquids have run out, and even after all the organs of your body, have turned into dust.

Realising this, try to more often get to the bones of things. Try to see, what lasts the longest. Try to see what matters most. What things are more worthwhile pursuing, and what things are in comparison with these just fleeting things. So this element of earth can equally help you to gain a proper perspective on life. But try to extent your consideration not only to material things, but equally also to things beyond the material world.



## **Water**

Then we have the water element. The water element stands for life. It is what flows into material form and sustains and nurtures it. That makes it stand in direct opposition to the fire element. Because while water gives life, and sustains life, fire destroys it, or at least destroys the forms encompassing it. Water also has the nature to accept and support what is, good or bad. And because of this its nature, it tends to easily end up sticking to things. Did you ever notice, how easy it is to get stuck on a tv or phone screen? That is because of the watery nature of your being is inherently quite sticky. It easily gets attracted to one thing or another and then often sticks to it, at least for some time.

However, water also has the nature to flow wherever there is some new space to move into. It usually stays in established forms and flows along established ways, but you open a door for it, and it will go there. You might have observed that, whenever you become in some way compulsive or emotional, how the life inside you begins to flow within certain material confines and perhaps turns and turns in front of the same old walls, without really going anywhere. Nevertheless, if there is even one tiny hole in the wall, the water will give itself over to that.

In the Dhamma watery qualities play an important role too. They are indeed the life of a religion. Only if the followers of a religion practice and cultivate qualities

like clarity, benevolence (/compassion/friendship) (depth of heart), wisdom (depth of mind), adaptability, and purity, can we expect that the religion will thrive and will not easily die.

But in order to be able to constantly enough bring these qualities into manifestation in your own life, or your own religion, it may be best to begin becoming familiar with this element first within the body. For that you may meditate on the different instances of water that you may find inside yourself.

In the body there are many things of a watery nature to be found. The body is made up of more than 60% Water. So you have urine, bile, stomach acid, saliva, snot and so on, but what is perhaps the most practical to consider for getting into a pleasant meditative state, is the blood flowing throughout your body. If you can dwell on any of these instances of water, try whether you can make their unifying, nurturing and flowing nature spread throughout your body in a way that you can experience water with the entirety of your being. Become like an ocean. Make your mind like water and your body like water, so that the two can merge together. And if you can do that also with open eyes, see if you cannot more often also merge with the people around you in a similar fashion.

## **Air**

At last we have the air element. The air element is quite a life in its own right, only its nature is far more volatile

than that of water. On the other hand, because it is the element with least substance, it is almost a direct counterpart to the earth element, the most solid of the elements. However, the element with which it really shares some kinship is the fire element. Fire represents impermanence and destruction; air, forward movement and change. Without air, there can be no fire; and without change, there can be no end or destruction.

Then, precisely because the air element signifies change, it also embodies the concept of time. Change inherently implies moving forward in time, and moving forward in time entails change. Therefore, everything that occurs over time too is related to the air element and can be better understood through the lens of the air element.

Moreover, actually alongside with the idea of change, and time, there also comes a certain promise of the possibility of transformation and improvement. Of course, things can change for worse or for better. Or they can just fluctuate between the two. And that is the downside of the air element. But because the air element is a very lofty element, it more often refers to the loftier things of life. The arts, science, creativity, and for that matter, any lives and activities which possess a certain forward movement and are not just stuck in one place, are all symbolically represented by the air element.

In fact the whole idea of learning Dhamma and practicing Dhamma is a very airy idea, in that the

Dhamma is meant to help a person to move forward and indeed upward in life. Meditation plays of course a central part in that. And for that matter, meditation on the air element in the form of breathing is also perhaps THE most popular meditation subject.

Many people easily become stagnant in their lives. However focussing even for brief moments on the air going in and out of their nose often proves to be an effective aid to move forward again.

How so? Well, look at it. When you begin meditating, first you are identified with the body and you watch the air moving in and out of your nose. However, as you continue and the experience becomes smoother and more pleasant, you begin to forget about your body and become more and more identified with the breath and the pleasant flow inside your body. Once you reach this stage, you begin to have some control over which of the things of your life you want to allow to move on by themselves, and what kind of things you still want to hold onto.

Nevertheless, the air element is not just an aid to move forward in life; rather, because it is also the most subtle of the elements, it can equally be a great aid for moving upwards. In fact the air element might indeed be the best element for refining your consciousness and mind. Because even if you begin your meditation by focusing on your physical breath only, if you possess intelligence and intuition (both qualities which are equally attributed to the air element), these qualities will guide you into

increasingly subtle dimensions. Which in turn may ultimately grant you access to a direct knowledge of everything attributed to heaven, and to the good, the spiritual and the lofty... Merging you with the air element in a way that no wall can stop you, no fire can burn you and no water can dilute you...bestowing on you the perhaps highest of airy qualities which is that of Freedom...

## Combinations

Then as another idea, to really give you many diverse approaches so that you can think of the elements as often as possible,...is something I already briefly touched on above, and that is, that everything in the world, or everything in our experience is actually made up of all 4 elements, only in most substances or conditions one element stands particularly out.

So take for example the water in a glass of water. It has temperature, which is part of the fire element. It has substance, which is an earthy quality. And it has movement. Even if you think it hasn't, use a microscope and you will see it.

And the same thing applies to all the other elements... A fire, as another example, possesses a certain form, or shape, even if that is quickly shifting and changing, and that constitutes the earth element. It possesses a certain flowing and almost liquid nature, which constitutes the

water element. And it's shifting and changing nature, of course is it's airy characteristic.

Any real life physical object is held together by the binding nature of the water element. And even air possesses some amount of solidity, even if you would have to compress it that that fact becomes tangible for you...

Then you may take that consideration to the level of the mind too. For example when you have a thought, ...that is somewhat a movement of the mind, and as such belongs to the air element. But it will possess some feeling component to it, which is a representative of the water element, it will work with some information from any of the 6 senses (5 senses plus the mind as the sixth), which is representative of the earth element, and it will possess initiative energy of desire or intention which represents the fire element.

These however are just the given...if you want to really understand the 4 elements with ever greater depth, you can try creating ideas, or mind-states, or forms of matter, which combine these four elements in more complex forms...

## Conclusion

Concluding we might ask, what is the purpose of all this? What is the goal of understanding the four elements? Ultimately the goal is to change yourself, and

in this case to change yourself in the process of engaging with the elements. The more urgently you desire change, the more you may delve into the elements and their associations.

As your knowledge deepens, you will be able to utilise these associations to form ever-expanding chains, helping you to dive deeper and deeper into the mystery of your life, your mind, and the Dhamma.

May the Elements guide you into your own depth and into the larger Dimension of the Dhamma...

For more material on the  
Elements and on other wisdom  
topics, you may have a look at:  
[www.highermindart.info](http://www.highermindart.info)