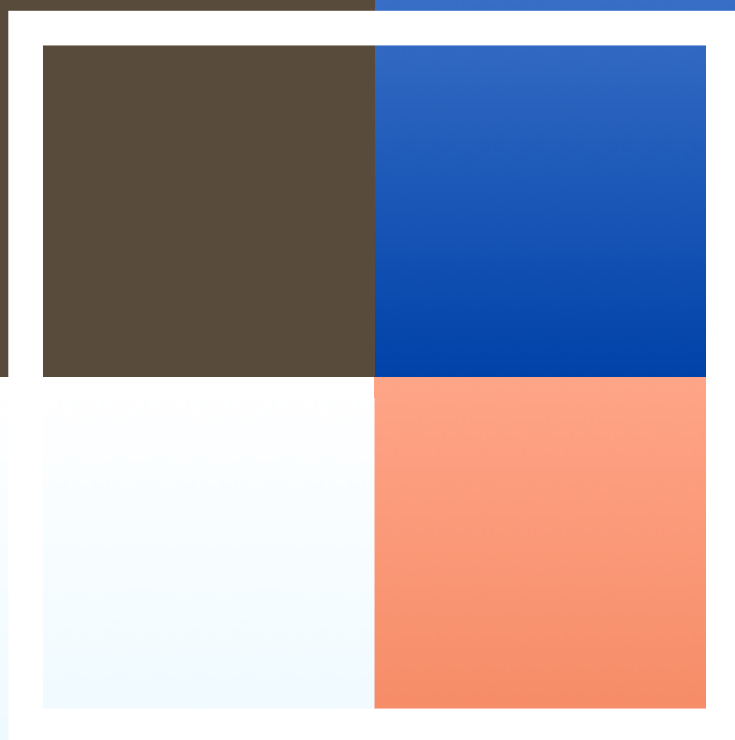


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# THE FOUR ELEMENTS

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# MATTER

*If you but seek'st enlightenment; first it's opposite must comprehend. But what is the opposite of spirit? Tis matter whose coarseness is most vivid.*

*But what is matter?, we might ask. Everything, that you can grasp. Anything, that you can see, can touch, can hear, or smell, belongs indeed to matters spell. Anything solid, liquid, fiery, or moving, is matter in its forms you spooking.*

*But he who all these knows, indeed he knows, what to enlightenment is opposed.*

*Yet, if you know them to their border, and in your mind can put in order; their spell will cease to reach you then, their trouble for you will come to 'ts end.*

## THE FOUR ELEMENTS

 **Earth**

Solidity  
Texture  
Weight

 **Air**

Movement  
Fluctuation  
Subtleness



**Water** 

Liquidity  
Clearness  
Depth

**Fire** 

Heat  
Radiation  
Energy

Since time immemorial, or at least since the arising of the first traces of mind, what the mind pays attention to, is what we now call matter.

Thus, even if we would seek to comprehend anything else, if we fail to get in the first place a clear view as to what matter is, it will be difficult to properly understand anything of a more elevated nature. Therefore, matter is the proper starting point for us.

Hence, we might start out by asking ourselves 'What is matter?'

For most people what matter is, seems to be so obvious a thing that probably only a few will bother thinking further about it. Consequently this writing is probably for the most part, written for the few only.

Nevertheless we will try to show, how an understanding of a certain thing can actually give a person a certain power to change that thing. Accordingly, if a person is in any way dissatisfied with his experience of matter, to study matter may prove indeed quite useful a thing to improve upon the situation of this his dissatisfaction.

In the Buddhist system of thought, matter is divided into four primary elements. And consequently we start our exploration of the nature of matter with these four elements.

Keeping an eye on the practical relevance of the exposition, the thing of primary importance regarding understanding the four elements, is to first understand their nature or characteristics, and secondly to learn how to balance them.

Thus, anything material which is experienced as solid, as weight and/or as texture, we take to pertain to the earth element. Anything that is experienced as liquid, as clearness or as depth is grouped under the element of water. All forms of heat, radiation and light are taken as expressions of the fire element. While

fluctuation, movement and anything which is subtle, is categorised under the wind or air element.

This is the first dissection of matter, which allows for a greater comprehension of what matter is.

When this can be done, various other forms of matter and phenomena belonging to the category of matter may become comprehensible. For example may forces such as magnetism, electricity, gravity, and others, be deduced through the comprehension of this basic form of classification and through a study of how these, arising in conjunction, will interact with one another to form all the variations of things pertaining to matter.

Accordingly we can consider a material force as electricity as a combination of the qualities of the fire and the air element. Magnetism, on the other hand may be said to arise due to the interaction of the qualities of water with those of fire. A force as cohesion or binding, comes about through the interaction of water with earth. Physical maturation arises through the interaction of the fire, the earth and the water element. The quality of expansion arises through the interaction of the element of fire with the air element, while the quality of pressure can be seen to come about through the interaction of the elements of air and earth.

But then, as has been said, not only is it important to learn to distinguish matter thus by means of the four elements, but as the experience of matter by itself very often is rather disagreeable an experience, a person will also have to learn how to balance these four elements out against one another. For that end he might try to recognise, that each element has a certain counter element to it. Thus, earth, being the most substantial of the elements, has as a counterpart the air element. An understanding which will suggest, that the best way to remove an excess in the earth element (i.e. too much heaviness), is through an increase in the air or wind element (i.e. increasing movement). A similar thing can be seen with the other pair. In that, an excess in fire (i.e. too much heat) for

example, might best be balanced by an increase of the water element, etc.

And this then will be the first step in mastering matter.

## THE FOUR ELEMENTS AS SENSE-OBJECTS

Usually the four elements at first will have to be apprehended through any one of the 5 senses. And through each sense they are apprehended somewhat differently in accordance with the nature of the sense-organ.

Regarding the object of the eye, there may be found two different qualities for consideration, one is the form of the object and one is the colour of it.

Thus, there are earthy forms, such as heavy looking coarse bulky objects. There are fiery forms, such as objects which glow or radiate light. There are watery forms, marked by their translucency or clearness and depth of appearance. And there are airy forms such as those appearing subtle.

But then, there are also earthy colours like as brown, black or grey. There are fiery colours as red, orange and yellow. There are watery colours as blue, and green. And to the wind element may be assigned the colour of white.

Similarly in regards to each sense organ.

Odours are apprehended through the nose. Thus, there are earthy odours, such as odours that are heavy, suffocating, or in some way coarse. There are odours that are of a fiery kind, such as those which have some characteristics of sharpness or stinging or burning. There are odours of a watery kind, like those that have some characteristics of moistness, clarity or depth. And there are

odours of the airy type, like odours of freshness, purity and subtleness.

Flavours are apprehended through the tongue. So there will be earthy flavours, like heavy or nutty flavours, or salty and peppery flavours or any flavour of a coarse type. There are fiery flavours, as spicy, or biting flavours as bitter and sour. There are flavours of a watery kind, such as clear, easy down flowing flavours as sweetness, or flavours with some characteristics of wateriness, as salads and fruits. And there are flavours of the airy kind, such as flavours that are rather plain, subtle or tasteless.

Similarly with the element of sound, apprehended through the ear. There are earthy sounds, that are heavy, coarse or painfully loud. There are sounds that are fiery, such as forceful or glorious kinds of sound. There are also sounds that are of a watery nature, such as sounds that are characterized by clarity and depth. And there are equally sounds of an airy nature such as sounds that are sounding very swift, fast and subtle.

Concerning tangibles, there are those of an earthy kind, such as what feels solid, hard or heavy. Tangibles of a fiery type, are experiences of heat, sharpness or pain. A touch of a watery kind, is what feels liquid or is experienced as possessing depth. And tangibles of an airy kind will be experienced as movement, fluctuation or as subtleness.

Each of those sense experiences in turn, is conveyed via a certain medium. Thus, the main medium for conveyance of forms and colours to the eye is the element of light (an element belonging to the fire element). The main medium for conveying tastes to the tongue is the element of water. The main medium both for conveying smells to the nose and sounds to the ear is the element

of air. And in regards to touch is the earth element the main medium of conveyance.

Thus may the whole of sensual experience be fitted into this basic form of classification.



## THE LIFE ELEMENT

When these four elements have become balanced, matter may become a possible basis for the arising of a new element; the element of life.

The life element, or in traditional terms, the faculty of life<sup>†</sup>, is a form of matter, possessing the solidity of the earth element, the subtleness and movement of the wind or air element, the energy, or heat of the fire element, and the clearness of the water element...harmonised to a degree of perfect balance.

In distinction to ordinary matter, life is not a mere static phenomenon, but rather a process that continues by itself, being initiated from a centre around which the process gravitates or revolves. This life is characterised by growth, and decline, by birth and by death. And as long as it lasts, it will be drawn or animated by the duality of pleasure and pain, or attraction and repulsion. One indicating to it the way to growth and increase, the other, where lies danger and threat. One being the manner to obtain pleasure, the other, the way to escape pain.

Thus following this, its nature, a life gradually grows and becomes more complex. And growing in this fashion in complexity, one life becomes more and more an interaction of many lives, as well as a chain of long processes.

## THE ELEMENTS IN RELATION TO THE WHOLE OF EXPERIENCE

Although the elements are most fittingly considered under the heading of matter, they are not limited in their explanatory usefulness only to matter. Thus, the whole of experience may actually be comprehended by an understanding of the various qualities of those elements. Along such a line, earth would stand for matter as a whole. Fire would stand for energy, that is, what I have just treated under the heading of the life element. Water stands for emotions, in that material experiences are reflected within them. Because in contrast to material experiences without, which without an binding element are just fractured and divided, in emotions, as in water, sense-impressions or material things, converge in one singular element. While the thinking mind is symbolised by the wind element. That is, things are moving in some particular direction under the dominion of the thinking mind. 4 plus 5 is magically transformed into 9...."Such and such is my current situation", becomes, ..."Later I will do such and such." And in that manner, everything comprehended about four elements in relation to matter, may be used to gain a comprehension of the mind.

## BALANCING THE FOUR ELEMENTS

In meditation practice, one can, either as a practice in itself, or whenever the practice with one's primary meditation subject (for example Anapanasati) is getting stagnant, ask oneself questions like: "What is the predominant element in the body at the moment"...Waiting for an answer, one might repeat to oneself the names of the elements (earth, water, fire, wind...). When an answer comes, one may ask further as to how to balance it out with the aid of some other element. When one notices, that one has a condition of repeatedly one element being predominant or in excess, one should try to extend one's meditation practice beyond the sitting and ask oneself more often during the day as to what the predominant elements in the things one is contacting are and whether they are balancing the elements in one's own body or are rather producing imbalances. This can be done during any activity. For example one might notice that much hectic and activity is producing an excess in the wind element, or during eating one may try to remain aware of as to whether what one is eating is rather producing things like lightness and energy (principally conditions of the wind and fire element but here may be thought of as a condition of balance) or rather things like heaviness and lethargy. And noticing thus one should try to adjust one's eating habits.

Balancing the elements thus, how a person feels will improve... As one starts feeling better, one's mind becomes calmer...As one's mind becomes calmer, one will have more choice as to what of one's mental contents one wants to allow to continue and what not, having such choice, a person will have more control over life itself.

Alternatively, one might also use the Four Elements meditation as one's main subject for establishing mindfulness. In that case, one might frequently recite to oneself the names of the primary elements and further on, extend the recitation to include the main characteristics of the elements. Thus one might first recite earth, water, fire, wind,... earth, water, fire, wind... earth, water, fire, wind...and when one for example notices, that the name of a certain element seems to resonate with something one is experiencing now, one starts reciting more of the specific characteristics of that element. Thus one might, when getting stuck on the earth element, start to recite,...solidity, weight, texture, solidity, weight, texture,...and then perhaps further on go deeper into one of those...solidity, weight,...solidity, weight,...weight, weight,...heaviness, heaviness. When one thus found a proper word for it, one goes on asking questions,...heaviness, ...heaviness, ...how to solve?, how to balance?... The important thing thereby is, that one comes to a condition of sustainment of mindfulness, what words one uses to achieve this end is secondary. When mindfulness becomes thus longer sustainable, some intuition may arise as an answer to the posted question... Maybe an answer comes such as 'movement (wind-element) can balance heaviness', or 'heat can burn it up'...And when such answer arises, one should try to make some adjustment in one's activity in order to follow the intuition. Ideally one should try to keep going the meditation also during the solution process, reciting to oneself easily recite-able words, that at least off and on seem to resonate with one's experience. The recitation may at times become almost like a song. This is no problem (if it is not in an unsuitable place), but rather is almost desirable, as this fulfils the factors of sustainment for longer and may move even into a condition of joy...

Alternatively to the above listed characteristics, one might also use the traditional one's used in some Abhidhamma texts. Which are hardness, roughness, heaviness, and softness, smoothness, lightness for the earth element, flowing and cohesion for the water element, heat and cold for the fire element and pushing and supporting for the wind or air element. As mentioned above the words are secondary and may be modified to suit one's own understanding of the particular element.

## EXAMPLE OF DEVELOPING THE SPIRITUAL FACULTIES THROUGH CONTEMPLATION OF THE FOUR ELEMENTS

Meditation on the four elements is not just limited to the mere solving of problems, but can be taken quite far, to develop ones spiritual faculties or be used as a basis for further meditation. A true meditator will ever find new ways for applying his knowledge of the elements.

For example you hear music somewhere played. And being accustomed to meditate on the four elements, you try to see if you can comprehend that music in matters of the four elements.<sup>1</sup>

You hear the soft, dreamy notes of a piano, flowing forth like the slow clear waters of a little brook. Following its flow, sometimes you see it widen, sometimes you see it narrowing. Sometimes you find it churning in a little pool, just to go on flowing again in a definite direction. As you continue following its flow, you begin here and there also to hear some notes of brightness, appearing just like some glittering beams of sunlight, fracturing on the surface of the steadily flowing brook of piano music.

Then all the glimmer disappears and a sudden thunder like sound captures your mind. Some deep sounding bass instrument has brought into the scene the earth, just when you were wondering as to where to look for that element. But you yet comprehend it as a water suffused earth element, having the characteristics of both heaviness and depth.

More and more of that comes in. A drum, a bass, earth with more water, earth with more wind. You see how things blend together, and you realise how your understanding gradually increases as to how to know more than just one element at a time.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: I chose the example of music to have an example for developing the faculties which is distinctly different from the sense of bodily feelings, which will be used by most meditators for developing their faculties. I believe, a good meditator, will have no difficulties to translate this example into the sphere of the experiences of meditation centering around bodily feelings.

Slowly the thundering passes and you again perceive notes of brightness and a gentle wind's blowing speeds up a little everything in your field of perception. You see how the wind element and the water element gently merge together. And on top of it a fire's brightness.

And in the light of those bright notes, glittering orderly on the rest of the song, being breathed at rhythmically by some subtle strokes of lively motion, you begin to see a fairy's dancing play....<sup>2</sup>

For more on the workings of the body and mind, please download my book or check out my website [www.highermindart.info](http://www.highermindart.info)

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<sup>2</sup> I would recommend anyone who really is determined to get somewhere with the element meditation, to also try to use (or harmonise) more than one sense-organ, for example the body and sound or sight and sound, etc.