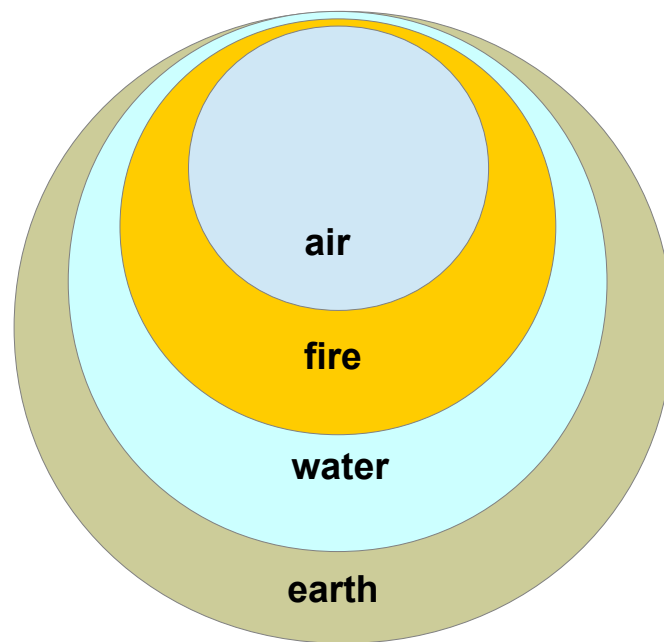


# The Four Elements



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## The Elements in the Buddha's Teaching

According to Buddhist insight, gained from direct experience in meditation, our existence consists of body and mind. The body, just like the inanimate matter around us, consists of the four elements, which are earth element, water element, fire element and air element. What is called earth element etc. is in reality not earth, water etc. in the normal literal understanding. These terms are about the principles of matter, which are the same inside our body as outside. To recognize these through one's own experience, through direct experience, is an important step in the Buddhist path of insight. Some explanations of this exercise are given below.

Through analytical meditation on matter and mentality, body and mind, as taught by the Buddha, we learn to see things as they really are in order to become free from attachment. Most people think that they can perceive with the sense organs, wood, cloth, table, chair, another body, etc., but if you look more closely, with the sense of touch, for example, you experience nothing but hardness, softness, roughness, smoothness, heaviness, lightness, and so on. Through intellectual learning we have learned the names of things and many people hold on to them as if they actually exist as such.

### Body

In order to understand our life, one must examine body and mind. With the analysis of the four elements we begin the investigation of the body.

Our body does not feel and does not think, only the mind thinks and feels. The body is an object for the mind. Both are interdependent in human life. Without mind, our human body would not exist, and without body, consciousness could not arise. The foundations of the body, the four elements, are unconscious matter, the earth element does not know that it is earth element, etc.. The elements are also not conscious of their characteristics. Only in the living body can consciousness perceive the elements and their characteristics.

The elements and thus inanimate matter and bodies are not themselves defilements, but they can be objects of mental defilements, such as aversion and craving.

The mind changes very quickly, the body changes more slowly. Therefore, at the beginning of meditation, it is easier to examine the body.

Our body is subject to constant changes, which can be roughly recognized by external influences: It changes through exposure to heat and cold, through exposure to sun and wind, through insect bites, through hunger, through thirst and many other external occasions. It changes its shape through external influences. The subtle changes that take place continuously can only be seen in meditation through concentration.

What is translated as matter or body was referred to by the Buddha with the Pāli word *rūpa*. This word comes from the word root *rup*, which means to change, transform, break, disappear. The English word matter or materiality comes from Latin and means substance. It is often associated with something that is solid, something that has mass. In the Buddhist teaching, matter is merely a counterpart to mind (*mano*) because it behaves differently and has a different function than mind. However, bodily matter is not a solid mass that exists as an unchanging foundation. There are no continuously existing solid bodies, there is nothing static that constitutes this body. How it is exactly, one has to experience by oneself in meditation. The analysis of the four elements is the beginning for this.

## Concepts - Ultimate Realities

There are two views of reality, one is based on ultimate realities (*paramattha*)<sup>1</sup>, and the other is based on concepts (*paññatti*). To practise *vipassanā* meditation, insight meditation, one has to analyze concepts until one sees ultimate realities, because only with ultimate realities as objects of contemplation one can practise *vipassanā* meditation.

Ultimate realities exist by their own nature, that is, they cannot change into something else. They cannot be reduced to something else. They are the essence of everything that exists. However, they are so subtle, so fine and short lived that one cannot perceive them with the ordinary state of mind. Our ordinary perception refers only to composites of these ultimate realities, compactnesses and concepts, such as body, woman, man, car, house, computer and so on. These compacts and concepts hide the true characteristics of the things that surround us. We give them a meaning that they do not have in reality. This leads to attachment, and attachment brings problems and difficulties.

Difficulties arise with the world, with other people and with things because we do not know their true nature and thus react inappropriately to changes which are quite natural. Attachment gives rise to worry and anxiety; we cannot live peacefully. When we know the nature of things through investigation, we can find peace of mind.

Through concentration in meditation, we can penetrate concepts and see and directly experience ultimate realities through correctly practised analysis based on direct experience.

These ultimate realities exist as mental and as bodily phenomena and as the unconditioned Nibbāna. The physical ultimate realities are the four elements and things that are derived from them. They are conditionally originated and impermanent. They constantly arise and pass away in a very rapid manner. Their arising in the same composition and the corresponding passing away appear only as long as there are conditions for them.

## Characteristics

The ultimate realities have characteristics that are quite specific to each individual phenomenon and they have characteristics that are generally inherent to all phenomena.

The specific characteristics are, for example, that fire is always hot. Fire can change, but the fact that fire is hot never changes, fire is never cold.

In the same way, earth is always solid, water is always liquid. On the basis of these characteristics, people have distinguished the elements and given them corresponding names.

Or in regard to mental phenomena, consciousness is always aware of an object, it always recognizes, it always takes an object. Consciousness passes away, but the characteristic that consciousness takes an object, that consciousness recognizes, never changes.

The general characteristics inherent in all phenomena are impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness or suffering (*dukkha*) and selflessness (*anattā*).

## The four Elements

The teachings about the elements as the fundamentals of matter, inanimate matter and matter of our body, can be found in many philosophical traditions, from Greek antiquity to Chinese medicine. If one analyzes matter systematically, one meets these foundations. The elements are called differently, but they always represent a respective order of the universe. In Buddhist teachings this knowledge is based on direct experiences from meditation, gained through deep concentration.

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1 *parama* = ultimate, *attha* = reality, thing

In Buddhist literature elements refer to fundamental phenomena. In the Pāli language the word *dhātu* is used, it is derived from the verb *dhāreti*, meaning: to bear, to endure, to hold. It means principle or element, basic substance, something that has its own characteristics. The Buddha used this word in various contexts.

With regard to the analysis of matter, he has mentioned four or sometimes five elements. The four elements are:

- Earth element,
- water element,
- fire element,
- air or wind element.

Sometimes he mentioned the space element as the fifth.

The four elements are also called *Mahābhūtā* in the Pāli literature. This word means those who have become great, or it can also be called the four essentials. In the *Visuddhi Magga*, a commentary on the Pāli scriptures, the *Mahābhūtā* are explained as follows:

*„>Because they are like mighty creatures< means there: - Just as a magician makes something that is not a jewel, e.g. water, appear as a jewel, or makes non-gold, e.g. a stone, appear as gold, or as he, without a ghost (yakkha) or ghost-woman, appearing as ghost or ghost-woman: - likewise the elements, although not blue themselves, cause a blue derived (secondary) materiality to appear; and although they are not yellow, red, or white, they make white materiality appear. Thus they are considered mahābhūtās because they resemble the powerful creatures (mahā-bhūtā) of a magician. Whoever those mighty creatures, such as ghosts and the like, may seize, one does not find their abode either within or without that person; and yet it cannot be said that they do not exist in dependence on that person. Likewise, one cannot claim that those four elements are not one within the other or one outside of the other, nor that they are independent of each other. Because the elements in the incomprehensibility of their place are similar to powerful creatures such as ghosts and the like, they are also considered mahābhūtās. ...*

*Thus, because the elements are great-change-producing bhūta, they are considered mahābhūtās.*"  
2

The four elements are the basic material components, all four are always inseparable. An element can never occur alone, whether in our bodies or in inanimate matter. They always come in groups of all four elements together, but in different proportions.

When we speak of the earth, it primarily contains the earth element, but it also contains the water, fire and air elements. It is the same with the air, the air also contains earth, water and fire elements. The earth element makes up the hardness or softness of the air, the water element shows up in what we call humidity. The fire element shows itself in the corresponding temperature.

The words for the elements, earth, water, fire, air can be used in different ways. This contemplation in meditation is about the consideration of the characteristics.

When we speak of the earth, either in terms of the ground beneath our feet or the planet we live on, it is a conventional view. Taking the concept of earth as an object in *samatha* meditation is the view the earth as object. Seeing earth and body as 'mine' or 'I' is a distorted perception because in the ultimate sense there is no owner. Such concepts are of course necessary for verbal communication, but believing that they are actually so develops a wrong view which leads to attachment and suffering.

Only through investigation one can develop the view of the characteristics of the elements that liberates from attachment. The distorted perception is based on hearsay only and not personal investigation. It has been adopted and learned, that earth, water, fire, and air are called in this way.

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2 Buddhaghosa: The Path of Purification, Kandy, 2010, p. 361 f

When one fails to see the function and characteristics of the elements and consciously to perceive them, misperception occurs. This creates attachment. One perceives earth and body as beautiful and wants to have them. Or one doesn't like earth and body and reacts with dislike. Or one thinks the elements belong to oneself, like this pride arises.

These views are based on delusion. If one sees the characteristics only as characteristics, neither aversion nor craving arises, mainly when one experiences their impermanence in insight meditation. In reality there is simply only earth, water, fire or air, internally and externally. Pride arises because one finds one's 'own' earth, one's 'own' water, one's 'own' fire, one's 'own' air better and more beautiful. Craving and pride arise. One finds joy, pleasure in things that are actually just earth element. When they change naturally, one grieves, resents, etc. Assuming earth element, water element, fire element, air element is one's own, one finds oneself better, equal or worse than others. One invests a lot of energy to improve the earth element, the water element, the fire element or the air element (cosmetic surgery, body building, etc.). By looking at the inner earth with pride, delusion grows stronger.

One believes very strongly that it is really so. That is why one has to investigate oneself, again and again, in order to have other experiences.

With a distorted view one cares only for the internal earth element, without regard for the external, the animate of other beings or the inanimate. One seeks beauty, pleasure, delight with one's 'own' earth element, one's 'own' water element, one's 'own' fire element or one's 'own' air element, without regard for the internal elements of other beings and the external elements. Problems arise from this, difficulties that cause suffering to other beings (pollution, climate problems, etc.).

If one does not investigate, wishes arise to possess more and more things. They are seen as 'mine' although actually they are only manifestations of general principles of nature with their characteristics and functions.

All other material phenomena are derivatives or characteristics of the four great elements, such as colour, taste, smell. It is through their different compositions that matter appears so diverse. When we analyze material phenomena, such as our bodies, we always come up with these four great parts. Since they make up our entire cosmos, they are named after the great determining phenomena, namely

- Earth element, everything that is solid,
- water element, everything that is liquid,
- fire element, everything that manifests itself as heat and cold,
- air element, everything that moves and supports.

All material phenomena or substances, from the smallest particle to light, fluffy clouds, to the most gigantic, massive object, such as a mountain or an aeroplane, consist of these four elements. Both living matter, such as the bodies of humans and animals, and inanimate matter consist of these four basic substances. The analysis of the elements is an important contribution to understand life.

#### **The 12 characteristics of the 4 elements are:**

- Earth element: hardness, roughness, heaviness, softness, smoothness, lightness,
- water element: flowing, cohesion,
- fire element: heat, cold,
- air element/wind element: supporting, pressure/pushing.

The earth element has the quality of spreading out, through its solidity it serves as support and foundation for the other elements. Without the earth, the other elements would have no support and could not exist. The earth element receives the other elements. It offers stability.

The water element holds the other elements together, without water the other elements, especially the earth element would dry and disperse. The other elements can dissolve in water and thereby become fluid, just as we sprinkle powder into water to keep it from being blown away. And also to make it slippery, flowing, supple, adherent. Just as you have to stir cement into water in order to be

able to process it, or sprinkle flour into liquid if you want to get a cake batter. We cannot perceive the water element itself through body consciousness, we can only perceive the characteristics of the other elements when in contact with water, the temperature of the fire element, the hardness or softness of the earth element and the movement when water runs over the skin. The movement is the air element, which is contained in water. Only by inference do we know that it is water.

The fire element shows itself as warmth up to heat or in its lack as cold. It has the function to ripen. Fruits only ripen when it is warm. Another function of the fire element is to soften. We all know that cooking, which is nothing but the application of the fire element on food, softens food. Raw potatoes are hard, when cooked they are soft, and the same is with carrots, beets and many other kinds of food.

In the body, too, it has the function of ripening, setting all the digestive processes in motion and making the eaten food soft and absorbable. When one is hungry and one doesn't eat something, the digestive fire attacks the stomach walls, there is a burning sensation. When one has a fever, the fire element is in excess in the body.

When we are cold, we also say 'I am frozen stiff'. Muscles can become rock hard through prolonged exposure to cold, they become soft again through application of heat. They become hard through an excess of the earth element, soft through the influence of the fire element.

The air element, also called the wind element, manifests itself through all kinds of movements, from large-scale displacements to the finest vibrations, it can appear in very different ways. It can thus appear as a large flowing movement or as a sequence of many small movements. Its function is to shift the position of the other elements, to bring them to another place. We can perceive it as a movement that always ends in more or less pressure, as pushing, pulling or shoving.

The other function of the air element is that of support. If there would be no air in our body between the solid tissues, the whole body would just be a heap of collapsed tissues. Only through the air element does it get its specific form. If the air element is deficient in its supporting function, rubbing occurs with the resulting unpleasant feelings, which we call pain.

Also a balloon only gets its shape and size through the air it contains.

Earth element and water element are similar because they both belong to the heavy elements. Fire element and wind element are also similar because they both belong to the light elements. The former two are dissimilar to the latter two.

The elements are mutually dependent, one causes the others, none can exist independently of the others.

The four elements can be perceived with their characteristics through body sensitivity and the consciousness arising on it. Three of the elements, namely earth, fire and air, are objects for body consciousness, the water element can only be perceived by mind consciousness. With mind consciousness all four elements can be perceived, but only with deep concentration. They can cause pleasant or unpleasant feelings that accompany the body consciousness.

When they give rise to unpleasant feelings, we call it 'pain' as a complex. If we break down this pain, we find, for example, hardness as a characteristic of the earth element and pressure as a characteristic of the air element. Since these two elements are unbalanced, they cause an unpleasant feeling, which we call 'pain' when we look at it superficially.

The composition of the four elements also has an influence on our mind, if they are not balanced, we do not feel well and there can also be mental imbalance.

Also if the outer elements are not balanced, it has an influence on body and mind. For example, our body dries out easily when there is a lot of external heat. On the mind, the thus dominant fire element can lead to irritability when there is external heat. Conversely, the lack of the fire element can lead to coolness and stiffness of the mind when there is external cold. A balanced inner and outer fire element leads to warm-heartedness and mental flexibility.

When many people gather in a too small room with no possibility of movement, the earth element increases greatly in their environment. The excessive earth element leads to sluggishness and sleepiness. We then long for movement in the fresh air. The air element is then in deficiency, this too leads to sluggishness of mind, because the air element in balance makes the mind active, alert

and flexible.

If the air is dry, intuitive perception, which is supported by the water element, is reduced, drinking, showering or bathing then helps.

If we have knowledge about the functions of the elements, we can harmonize our living conditions internally and externally.

All things have their specific parts of the four elements. Stones, rocks, metals have a high proportion of earth element.

Leaves have a high proportion of water element,  
feathers have a high proportion of air element, etc.

The Buddha divided the organs and body parts according to the order of the elements, according to which element they mainly contain. Thus he classified all the solid organs, such as

head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin,  
muscle flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys,  
heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs,  
large intestine, small intestine, stomach contents, faeces, brain,

belonging to the earth element.

He assigned a further 12 of 42 body parts with a predominant part of water element to the water element:

Bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat,  
tears, grease, saliva, nasal discharge, synovial fluid, urine.

The fluidity of the water element gives the body suppleness and holds it together, our body consists of about 60% of the body weight of water. In addition to its function of holding the body together, water serves to transport food and oxygen, and to eliminate toxins and metabolic residues that burden the body.

He has differentiated the fire element according to its different occurrence and function:

Heat, which warms the body,  
heat, through which the body ages and is consumed,  
digestive heat, whereby what has been eaten, drunk, consumed and tasted is completely digested and heat in the case of fever.

The entire digestive process and cell metabolism is based on the fire element. The coarse food is softened and made resorbable in the outer digestion by the fire element and burnt in the inner cell metabolism by the fire element, producing new matter, which is called energy, which we need for all our mental and physical activities.

We can also observe this principle externally in the rotting of plant waste as compost, through heat that develops inside a compost heap, the plants burn and become earth again.

The air element occurs in our body in six ways:

as ascending wind,  
as descending wind,  
as wind in the belly,  
as wind in the intestines,  
as winds passing through the limbs,  
as inhalation and exhalation.

The ascending winds are the winds rising upwards, which cause vomiting, belching of air (burping), etc.

The descending winds are the downward winds which expel excrement, urine, flatulence, etc.

The winds in the abdomen are the winds outside the intestines, for example in the stomach.

The winds in the intestines are the air inside the intestines.

The wind element provides support for the body, thus the body does not fall over but remains upright. Through the winds running through the limbs, the body can assume different postures such as walking, standing, sitting and lying down, thereby hands and feet, arms and legs can be



bent and stretched and make movements in different directions. It is the consciousness that creates the wish and directs the wind element accordingly.

One element is dominant in the individual parts of the body. However, one element can never appear alone, therefore the other three are always present, they appear in groups.

The groups of elements are composed differently in the body, but basically they all consist of the four basic elements and their characteristics of colour, smell, taste and nutritive essence.

The nature of the groups in our body depends on their cause of origin. There are four causes for the groups to arise:

- By our past actions (*kamma*),
- by consciousness,
- by weather or temperature,
- by food.

So there are *kamma*-caused groups, consciousness-caused groups, temperature-caused groups, nutrition-caused groups. The latter three we can influence, the former has its cause in the past, so that we cannot change it at present.

Inanimate matter is only caused by temperature.

Thus the body parts stomach contents, faeces, pus and urine are only caused by temperature.

Tears, sweat, saliva and nasal secretions are caused by consciousness and temperature.

The digestive fire is conditioned by *kamma*.

Inhalation and exhalation are caused by consciousness only.

All other of the 42 parts of the body are due to all four causes, namely *kamma*, consciousness, temperature and nutritive essence.

The groups arise with all four elements together as groups and in the same place, and they also pass away in the same place, they do not move.

The elements are in no way static, in no way something fundamentally existent, they are constantly changing, it is a continuous flow of arising and passing away. They are subject to constant change and transformation, both in our bodies and in inanimate matter there is a continuous process of changing. Some people express it as feeling the flow of energy. In physics, too, it is said today that matter is energy.

In fact, it is the material foundation of the body, the groups of elements, which come into being very quickly and pass away again in the same place. Only with deep, sustained concentration and the resulting light of wisdom can one see these processes directly. With machines, these processes cannot be grasped because they are very short-lived. In the beginning of observation, hardness or softness may appear as something that exists for a certain time. In fact, hardness, softness, etc. disappears immediately after it comes into being. The longer and more closely we observe, the more clearly we can see these relationships.

As long as there are conditions, the elements appear again and again. If the conditions fall away, they are no longer produced.

## Disease

If the elements are in the right relationship and in harmony, we are healthy. If there is an imbalance, we feel unwell and it is called disease. Many natural healing methods are based on balancing the elements. Chinese medicine in particular is based only on balancing the elements. Tibetan medicine, which has integrated the Buddha's teaching, is also based on balancing the elements.

In contemplating and analyzing the elements in the body, wholesome consciousness arises, wholesome in the sense that it leads to mental and physical health. It is accompanied by joy and happiness, mindfulness, confidence, non-craving, non-aversion, harmony, tranquility, mental lightness and softness, flexibility, skillfulness, uprightness. This creates a pleasant, balanced state of mind, which is conducive to mental and physical health.

Consciousness is one of the four causes for the production of matter. It is important to know that consciousness is not a unit that is always the same, but a flow of different moments of consciousness which change from moment to moment. Wholesome consciousness produces very balanced matter, i.e. the elements are well balanced. Unwholesome consciousness, rooted in craving, aversion and delusion/ignorance, produces unbalanced matter. The solidity of the earth element can be very much in excess, or the pressure of the air element, the heat of the fire element, the cohesion of the water element. Complaints show themselves accordingly. Germs find a fertile base more easily on unbalanced matter.

We cannot reverse our past actions, which may have caused illness. We can, however, reduce their kammic effect by remaining in wholesome consciousness now and avoiding the causes for diseases in the future. This is a very effective, low-cost way of health care.

The study of the four elements leads to valuable knowledge about the body and about inanimate matter. If the investigation is carried out again and again through direct experience, the knowledge leads more and more to insight and wisdom and the resulting liberation from attachment. Since attachment is always associated with suffering, this contemplation also leads to liberation from suffering.

Analysis liberates from false ideas that cause suffering, which are based on superficial perception.

If we analyse the body again and again according to the elements, we lose the false idea of 'my body', 'my leg', etc. and also the idea of 'I have a stomach ache', 'I have a headache', 'my leg hurts', but we see that the elements are unbalanced and only due to this unpleasant feelings occur. This realization is a big step towards healing the acute pain, as well as the healing of suffering in general. Acute pain can disappear completely by contemplating the elements.

The well-known meditation teacher Mahasi Sayadaw from Burma reports a large number of cases of diseases cured through meditation at his meditation centre, and the Mahasi method of meditation is based on the four-elements-meditation.<sup>3</sup>

The Buddha says that by recognizing the elements, by directly experiencing them as physical components on the one hand, and by recognizing consciousness as a mental element on the other, peace arises in the mind. Peace arises because wrong ideas are overcome. He also calls ideas a disease because they cause greed, hatred and delusion, which lead to suffering.

## Notes on the Practice

The analysis of the four elements is a *samatha* (concentration) meditation, but at the same time it is an important prerequisite for *vipassanā* (insight) meditation, because it is the basis for the investigation of the body or matter in general.

Analysis here means observing and recognizing the nature of the elements.

All bodily phenomena are considered in meditation according to these elements, whereby this distinction gradually becomes more and more subtle.

The analysis or contemplation of the elements is one of the foundations of mindfulness (*sati*) of the body. The Buddha taught four foundations of mindfulness:

Mindfulness of the body, of feelings, of consciousness and of mind objects.

Mindfulness of the body gives a stable foundation for the practice of the other foundations. The body is coarser than the mind, therefore easier to investigate in the beginning.

Moreover, the physical can be observed simultaneously with its existence, because the mental observes the physical. This means perfect presence in the present moment of what is happening. The mental can only be observed afterwards, because the observing consciousness is different from the one that is analyzed or observed.

The Buddha repeatedly praised mindfulness of the body. Unwholesome things cannot enter the

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<sup>3</sup> Vgl. Dhammathera, cases of healing through Vipassana, by Mahasi Sayadaw, Malaysia, 1984

mind during this contemplation. Specifically, he states that dissatisfaction can be conquered, that one can endure cold and heat, hunger and thirst, contact with flies, mosquitoes, etc., that one can bear sun and wind with equanimity, that one can bear malicious, unpleasant words without anger, that one can bear bodily feelings which ordinary consciousness labels as painful, sharp, hard, tormenting, unpleasant, unpleasant, life-threatening, that one can attain the four mental absorptions (*jhānā*) at will, that one can attain supernatural powers.

The Buddha said that through the practice of four-elements-meditation one becomes confident about the *dhamma*, becomes content and can experience wisdom to the point of unshakability.

During the practice of four-elements-meditation wholesome consciousness arises, which is accompanied by wisdom. Through this wisdom faculty, a very clear, pure consciousness arises, which generates matter that radiates and gives off light. The Buddha speaks of the light of wisdom, and this is not only meant in a figurative sense. The light of wisdom is a natural accompanying factor of deep and strong concentration. It is necessary to develop this light in order to practise insight meditation (*vipassanā*) effectively. Without this light of wisdom, one cannot see phenomena as ultimate realities and only with ultimate realities one can practise *vipassanā* meditation in the sense of the Buddha's teaching. With the help of the light of wisdom, one is able to see one's own body and inanimate matter as tiny particles in four-elements-meditation.

These particles can then be seen to arise and pass away very quickly. But these particles are not yet ultimate realities, one has to penetrate them further to see and analyze the composition of the elements in them. Only on this foundation *vipassanā* meditation with its liberating effect is possible. The practice of analyzing the elements is taught in two ways in the transmitted scriptures of the Buddhist Pāḷikanon, summarized and detailed. It is summarized in the Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta, the longer discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (DN 22).

There the Buddha instructs practitioners to systematically examine this body with awareness, in whatever place and position one is, in order to experience the elements. 'In this body there is the earth element, the water element, the fire element and the wind element.'

The Buddha compares this procedure to a butcher who has slaughtered a cow, sits down at the crossroads, with the cow broken down into its individual parts; in the same way, one should systematically analyze this body, in whatever place, whatever position it is, as consisting of the elements: 'In this body there is the earth element, the water element, the fire element and the wind element'.

One should do this exercise with one's own body and with the bodies of others. First internally and then externally and then internally and externally. To examine the bodies of other beings accordingly, one needs very strong concentration. In the beginning, one can contemplate this exercise by concluding: 'If my body is composed in this way, the body of other beings must also be composed in the same way'.

This contemplation is recommended by the Buddha again and again with regard to all contemplations. It serves to understand the identical appearance of conditionally arising phenomena internally and externally.

In the commentary to this teaching, the example of the butcher and the cow is explained as follows:

Just as a butcher, as was customary in ancient India, after slaughtering a cow and dividing it into separate pieces, sits down at a crossroads, i.e. at the centre of the roads running in the four directions, so the practitioner divides the body into its elements, in whatever position caused by one of the four body postures, and in whatever direction it is.

The butcher who raises the cow, leads it to the slaughterhouse, ties it up, puts it there, slaughters it, or sees the slaughtered dead cow, does not lose the idea of 'cow' until he has cut the cow open and cut it into pieces. But as soon as he has cut up the cow and sits at the crossroads, the idea of 'cow' disappears and the idea of 'meat' appears. And he does not think: 'I sell a cow' or 'people buy a cow', but he sells 'meat'.

In the same way, before this practice, people thought: 'The body is me' or 'The body is mine', 'I am a person, a woman or a man'. Through frequent practice internally and externally, this idea is lost. The knowledge that the body is merely a compilation of the four elements is strengthened.

The meditator corresponds to the butcher in the parable; the idea of a 'cow' corresponds to the idea of a 'being'; the four postures correspond to the junction of the four roads; the contemplation of the body according to the elements corresponds to sitting down in front of the divided cow.

In the beginning, when the concentration is not yet so strong, one perceives the elements with body awareness, arising from body sensitivity. The body sensitivity is distributed over our whole body, inside as well as on the periphery, on the skin. The elements are the inner tangible objects for the body consciousness, through the following mind processes the consciousness can recognize the characteristics. When the concentration is deep and strong, only mind consciousness occurs, which can also recognize the sensations and elements. Body consciousness is the only five-sense consciousness that can be accompanied by painful or unpleasant feelings related to the body.

If one experiences pain or other unpleasant feelings, one should ignore them as much as possible at this point and concentrate on perceiving the characteristics of the elements.

This *samatha* meditation serves to build up deep concentration, and based on this concentration one can then later perceive feelings and other mental phenomena in a very differentiated and exact way. Mindfulness of feelings would remain fragmentary and superficial at this point because the concentration is not yet deep enough.

Through examining the elements, one will find out that, apart from these four great elements, there is nothing to be found in the living body, nor in inanimate external matter. Other kinds of matter are derivatives of the elements.

One should not practise only one element for too long time, but also consider the other elements. If one observes one element exclusively too long, for example observing again and again only the air element with its characteristics of pushing and pressure, it can be that this element gets into excess through the attention and can thus lead to very unpleasant sensations. One should always look at the elements alternately and in equal proportions, as well as within the elements, look for and observe the two opposite manifestations, such as softness and hardness in the earth element.

If one has difficulties practising the four elements meditation, one can reflect on the above explanations about the elements.

In this way, the mind engages with the elements and approaches them through reflection. If one practices these reflections repeatedly, the elements become clearer and one can locate them in the body, as explained earlier. If one then looks at them again and again, sooner or later neighbourhood concentration will develop.

Because of this analytical approach, this meditation is also called analysis of the elements. The four-elements-meditation is not only an exercise in concentration, but it also brings up valuable knowledge about the body and also about inanimate matter.

The fruits of the four elements meditation are described as overcoming fear and anxiety, pleasure and displeasure, excessive joy and aversion or sadness for very desirable or undesirable objects respectively.

As a bridge from *samatha* (concentration) to *vipassanā* (insight) meditation, one must practise four-elements-meditation. This is necessary to understand ultimate matter, as the Buddha taught in several suttā. One can also practise four-elements-meditation starting from the concentration of the fourth *jhāna* of *ānāpānasati* meditation or white *kasīṇa* meditation. It is then much easier to recognize the elements in their subtlest composition.

## Practice during Sitting

One starts in sitting meditation by systematically examining the elements with the characteristics that are easiest to recognize.

Then the order is:

Hardness, softness, pressure/movement, supporting, heat, cold, heaviness, lightness, roughness, smoothness, flowing, cohesion.

Each characteristic must first be examined in one place in the body, and then one must try to look at it through the whole body. All characteristics can be perceived over a large area, but also in very small different places. Within one characteristic one can also find the others in small places.

1. Try to look at **hardness**. You can start to perceive the buttocks, there hardness becomes very evident, externally the contact with the ground, but also internally as the bones. Then you can try to perceive the bones of the skull, also the hair roots in the scalp can be perceived as hardness, from there the cheek bones, the teeth, in the neck the vertebrae, the chest with the ribs and the sternum in front and the spine behind. Then you can go to the arm and finger bones, the pelvis and down through the legs and feet.

Try to identify hardness in the body systematically, from the head to the feet.

2. If you can see the characteristic of hardness well, look for **softness** by feeling into the cheeks. Then you can feel the brain inside the head. There is softness in the hard parts too. Practise systematically until you can feel softness through the whole body.

Then start again with hardness and then again find softness through the body. Practise hardness and softness alternately a few times.

Repeat this process many times until you are satisfied that you are doing well.

3. When you are satisfied to recognize both characteristics like this, try to perceive **pressure/pushing/movement**. To recognize pressure/pushing, one can feel in the chest while perceiving the movement and pressure there when breathing in. Then one should direct awareness to another part of the body nearby and notice the pressure of the breath there. One can also begin by observing the movement that causes the abdomen to rise and fall. In this way one should perceive the movement and pressure of the breath throughout the body, from the chest downwards to the feet and upwards to the head.

Where there is movement, there is pressure. One should be able to find pressure/pushing throughout the body. In some places it will be obvious, in some subtle, but it is present throughout the body.

4. When you are satisfied with recognizing these four characteristics, look for **supporting** in the body. Straighten your body and keep it upright and straight. The force that keeps your body upright, quiet and straight is supporting. You can perceive supporting particularly well between the vertebrae. You can also perceive supporting in the abdomen, how the organs are held in shape by air. Practice systematically until you can see supporting throughout the body from the head to the feet. Then, when you can easily perceive supporting, you should observe all four characteristics alternately again and again.

5. Next, look for **heat** (or warmth) in the body. Usually this is easy. The abdomen is usually a good place to find heat.

6. Then look for **cold** by feeling the coldness of the breath as it enters the nostrils, and then systematically feel it throughout the body.

7. When you are satisfied with recognizing these six characteristics, look for **heaviness** in the body. Begin by placing two hands one on top of the other in your lap and feel the heaviness of the top hand, or feel the heaviness of the head as it rests on the spine. Practice systematically until you can find heaviness throughout the body.

8. Then look for the opposite of heaviness, **lightness**. You can develop a sense of this by moving a finger up and down, feeling its lightness. Practice again from the head to the feet until you can feel lightness through the body, and then look for the eight characteristics throughout the body again and again in alternation as explained above.

9. When you can see these characteristics well, look at **roughness**. When you rub your tongue against the roof of your mouth, you can perceive roughness. So again from the head to the feet through the whole body you can look for and find roughness, in smaller places or in larger areas. If you can perceive roughness, try to perceive all the previously practised characteristics up to roughness, one by one and alternately in the order mentioned, again and again, through the whole body from head to toe.

10. Then look for **smoothness**. You can find smoothness by feeling inside below the skin and going through the body like this. You can then also find smoothness inside the body by systematically walking through the body. Then again look for all ten characteristics individually through the whole body.

Then again begin to recognize all ten characteristics in the order mentioned.

The above ten characteristics can all be perceived directly through the sense of touch, but the last two characteristics, flow and cohesion, can be perceived through inference, based on the other ten characteristics. This is because they are taught last.

11. To recognize **cohesion**, be aware of how the body is hold together by the skin, the flesh and the tendons. The blood is hold together by the skin like water in a balloon. Without cohesion, the body would fall apart into separate pieces and particles. The holding together is perceived as a feeling of tightness. This feeling of tightness is evident in the lower back, to the left and right of the spine. Or you can observe it on the back of the lower legs above the heels.

Develop this characteristic systematically through the whole body as previously described.

You can also perceive this characteristic well if you take the whole body into attention. You can feel how it is hold together.

12. To look at **flowing**, you can start to follow the pressure from the heart upwards into the head and then from there downwards to the heart. In this way, with good concentration, you can perceive flowing well. Then be aware of how the blood flows through the blood vessels throughout the body. Develop this characteristic as described earlier.

If you have difficulty in recognizing cohesion and flowing, you should look at the previously mentioned characteristics again and again, one by one, through the whole body.

If you are skilled in this, you will see that the quality of cohesion also becomes clear.

When you can look at all twelve characteristics clearly through the whole body, from head to feet, you should continue to look at them again and again in the order mentioned.

In this order, try to look at one characteristic at a time, from head to toe. You should develop it in this way until you can do it quite quickly. If you practise in this way, the elements may not be balanced, some elements may become excessive and unbearable. Especially hardness, heat and pushing can become excessive. When this occurs, you should focus your attention on the characteristic that is opposite to the excessive one. Continue to develop concentration. You will find that this will rebalance the elements. Even an imbalance that existed before the practice can be balanced by looking at all the characteristics. When the elements are balanced, it is easier to develop concentration.

To balance the elements, the pairs with the opposite are mentioned below:

- Hardness - softness,
- roughness - smoothness,
- heaviness - lightness,
- flowing - cohesion,
- heat - cold,
- supporting - pushing.

When you can look at all twelve characteristics clearly through the whole body, from the head to the feet, you should continue to look at them again and again in the order mentioned. When you are satisfied with this, you should reorganize the order, viz:

- Hardness
- softness
- roughness
- smoothness
- heaviness
- lightness
- flowing
- cohesion
- heat
- cold
- supporting
- pushing

When you are skilled now in recognizing the twelve characteristics throughout the body, and these characteristics have become clear, you should look at the first six together as the earth element, the next two together as the water element, the next two together as the fire element and the last two as the air element. You should continue to recognize earth, water, fire and air to calm the mind and to gain concentration. You should do this again and again, a hundred times, a thousand times or a million times.

One can now stop wandering through the body. Imagine observing the body as a whole from above the head. You can also practise this way from a place on the neck. The mind becomes calmer and more concentrated when one does not wander from one place to another. In this way, one notices one characteristic after another in the whole body.

Practising in this way, one becomes familiar with the sensations, and one practices, the four elements in the order taught by the Buddha:

- Earth,
- water,
- fire,
- air.

One should not go through the body too quickly, but also not too slowly. If you practise too fast, you cannot really feel the characteristics of the elements; if you practise too slow, thoughts arise between and concentration cannot improve. One should make sure that one's mind is focused only on the object of meditation, the four elements, and not let the mind wander to other objects.

One should not just mentally recite: 'earth, water, fire, air', or know by past experience or inference, bones are hard etc., but be aware of the actual realities they represent:

- Earth: hardness, roughness, heaviness, softness, smoothness, lightness,
- water: flowing, cohesion,
- fire: heat, cold,
- air: supporting and pushing,

and feel them clearly. If you cannot feel them clearly, you must always start again with the simple ones as described above.

It is best if you can clearly perceive all 12 characteristics. In any case, one should be able to clearly perceive at least one characteristic for each element. If one does not practise in this way, pain or tension may result from an imbalance of the elements.

All other sensations in the body, such as itching, stinging, tingling, prickling, hunger, thirst, urination, defecation, pain, tension, stiffness, burning, throbbing, fullness, compactness, etc. can be reduced to the 12 characteristics mentioned. In any case, one should look at a sensation so long until one has found out the corresponding characteristics. Only when one sees and knows these clearly does wholesome consciousness arise, which is necessary for further understanding. If one sees in complexes such as tingling, itching, etc., consciousness arises combined with restlessness and delusion. These are both factors that prevent penetrating deeper into the phenomena to understand them and to develop wisdom.

When concentration improves through correct observation, you will see only elements and see them only as elements and not as a person or a self.

When one continuously contemplates the elements in the manner described above, good concentration arises. When no more distracting thoughts intervene, the mind reaches what is called neighbourhood concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*). This is a strong, deep concentration, so called because it is close to the mental absorptions (*jhānā*). One cannot achieve mental absorptions with four-elements-meditation.

Once one has reached neighbourhood concentration, one sees different kinds of light. For some meditators, the light begins to appear as smoky grey. As you continue to see the four elements in this smoky grey light, it will become whiter, like cotton, and then radiant, like clouds. At this point, the whole body will appear in front of you like a white form. You should continue to look at the four elements in this white form and you will see how this form will appear transparent, like a crystal or glass.

If you continue to determine the four elements in this transparent form, you will find that it sparkles and radiates light. You will find that the transparent form breaks into small particles called *rūpa kalāpā*. At this stage, a new stage begins, the analytical meditation with insight meditation following.

The particles should now be analyzed. Here is the end of the four-elements-meditation for attaining concentration.

## Practice during Daily Activities

For the practice of mental development, it is important to see things more and more as they are, that is, as ultimate realities (*paramattha*). This view needs continuous practice.

One can integrate this more and more into one's everyday practice, and formal meditation then becomes much easier.

In the Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the following activities, which should be clearly understood, are mentioned. The four-elements-meditation is the beginning to clearly understand materiality:

In **contemplating walking**, one should first differentiate the physical and the mental, so that it becomes clear that first the thought of walking arises and then the body starts moving. These two factors, first the mental, as the intention (*cetanā*) to walk, and then the sequence of physical movements, should always be clearly distinguished and observed. One can perhaps also observe the arising of consciousness-produced matter from the heart to the feet directly before going.

The element that causes movement is the air element, which can be felt through pressure that moves in small particles down to the feet. Some people describe this sensation as energy, but in fact it is matter which arises and vanishes in a rapid succession in micro-particles at different places.

When walking, pay attention to the movements of the body, especially the feet. Observe the sensations as which the elements show themselves.

Each step consists of six stages:

1. lifting the foot,
2. moving forward to the standing foot,
3. moving forward to the point of lowering,



4. lowering the foot,
5. putting the foot down,
6. shifting the weight or pressing the foot on the floor.

The sensations of how the elements manifest themselves should be found as clearly as possible while walking at each individual stage. In this way, firstly, concentration is strengthened, secondly, one dwells in wholesome processes of consciousness, thirdly, one acquires knowledge about the physical.

To 1. When lifting the foot, one can feel warmth, lightness and pressure. In addition, the foot becomes soft, which is an expression of the fire element.

To 2./3. When moving forward, one can primarily perceive pushing.

To 4. When lowering the foot, heaviness and flowing become dominant.

To 5./6. When setting down and shifting weight, heaviness, hardness and supporting are dominant. In addition, the foot becomes firm, which is an expression of the earth element.

This only describes the primary occurrence of the elements, it is important to perceive the individual sensations more and more clearly and to pay attention to them. The clear comprehension then consists in identifying these as the corresponding elements.

One should observe normal walking in this way, but also reduce the speed again and again in order to perceive more clearly. If one walks very, very slowly, one can feel and perceive every part of a step in detail, one thereby understands more and more about the body and is then also able to quickly observe these things at normal speed.

When one has reached the end of the walking path, observe standing before turning.

Then observe carefully the intention of turning in the mind and the following body movements. Then look again at the standing and the intention of going, and the subsequent movements of walking. When changing from walking to standing and from standing to walking, one can easily perceive the different characteristics of the air element. When standing, the supporting is very obvious, when walking, the pushing or the pressure in the corresponding direction become obvious.

Especially when walking outside, one should also pay attention to the elements surrounding the body. The air element can be perceived with the pressure on the skin or on the whole body. The earth element with its hardness and firmness in the supporting ground on the outside and the bones of the feet on the inside with the same characteristics. One can also perceive well the fire element internally and externally, how cold meets the inner heat. This process can be clearly felt with sustained concentration when it is cold outside and the cold slowly penetrates deeper and deeper inside.

We can also clearly observe the movements caused by the air element on external objects such as trees or our clothing.

For the other three body positions (*iriyā-patha*) of standing, sitting and lying down, proceed in the same way. Observe the four elements in the whole body. Include every change of posture, from sitting to standing, from standing to sitting, from sitting to lying down, from lying down to sitting up. It is advisable to perform the movements very slowly in order to gain a comprehensive knowledge. At the beginning of each change of movement, always observe the consciousness that arises first with the corresponding intention.

When standing, one can dominantly observe the supporting of the air element, which brings the body to stand or keeps it upright from the bottom to the top. The characteristics of the other elements are observed in their individual appearance and their accompanying function.

When sitting, supporting and pressure on the one hand, and heaviness on the other, are predominant and can thus be observed. Both characteristics serve to maintain the sitting posture. In addition, in the lower part of the body, cohesion of the water element can be well observed.

When lying down, one can also clearly observe the supporting of the air element, but also the heaviness and hardness of the earth element, as well as the cohesion and flowing of the water element.

One should individually feel and recognize the characteristics of the elements in the body in different lying positions and during the change of position, as well as perceive the observing consciousness as such.

## **Looking straight ahead and Looking sideways**

When you look somewhere straight ahead or sideways and then look away again, you should clearly see the movements of the eyelids and the eyeball. You can also clearly see heaviness and lightness in the eyeball. Also roughness and smoothness around the eyeball and the flowing of the liquid of the tears from the tear gland and below the eyeball can well be observed.

## **Bending and Stretching the Limbs**

Another field of this exercise is bending and stretching during the many different daily activities. One should also observe according to the characteristics of the four elements during all movements. The 12 characteristics as described for walking should be observed. Before each movement, one should consciously perceive the intention as the mental part. At the same time, the outer elements should always be perceived well, the inner air element pushes, movement happens, the outer air element is felt as a pressure on the body.

## **'Wearing the Robe and the Bowl'**

In the Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta it is said: 'Who acts with clarity of knowledge while wearing the robe and carrying around the outer robe and the bowl...' We can apply these instructions to the wearing of any clothing and the carrying around of other items of daily use. In ancient India, non-ordained people also wore clothes like robes.

One can perceive the four elements in terms of the touching sensations of all objects. This, in addition to the objects mentioned in the teaching, robe and bowl, is a broad area in daily activities. This is because touch sensations occur very frequently. One should perceive these characteristics of the elements without interruption. The earth element with the characteristics of smoothness and roughness, as well as softness and hardness, heaviness and lightness, is particularly clear, but the temperature of the objects is also easy to observe, with this one observes the fire element.

The water element cannot be perceived through body sensitivity. It can only be perceived through direct knowledge with mind consciousness. When one touches liquids, one perceives the other elements in the liquids through the body sensitivity. Thus one can perceive very clearly the fire element through the corresponding temperature, the air element through the pressure or the pushing, which show themselves as movement. Hardness and softness of the liquids show the earth element. One should practise to feel these characteristics more and more clearly.

When putting on and taking off clothes, one can observe the touches with regard to the four elements, and at the same time the previously mentioned field of bending and stretching is very clear. It is therefore necessary to observe the elements that are caused by touch and the elements that are produced by consciousness, which causes movements.

The clothes can be felt throughout the day when they are worn, and attention can also be drawn to this again and again.

## **Eating, Drinking, Chewing, Tasting**

One should also contemplate on the fact that food consists only of elements.

The four-elements-meditation concerning the movements of the body should be the main focus here. If one practices this with energy, mindfulness and concentration, these factors are a good protection against the arising of unwholesome states of mind. If processes of consciousness rooted in aversion or craving or greed should arise, one should notice them and turn back to the four-elements-meditation.

In the movements of the hand and of the arm the elements are to be considered in a similar way as it has been described for walking, because it is a constant lifting, moving forward and lowering, whereby in the whole process all four elements appear at different places. These processes should be looked at carefully and again and again.

When the food reaches the mouth, one should analyze the various touch sensations according to the four elements. First there is touch on the lips, then on the tongue. Two sensitivities are placed on the tongue, the body sensitivity, which perceives the four elements, and the tongue sensitivity, which perceives the tastes.

Here lies a large area of practice that allows many insights even with not deep concentration.

The objects of touch show themselves as the three elements earth, fire and air. The corresponding characteristics, as mentioned above, can be clearly perceived first on the lips, then on the tongue and palate during the eating process. Especially softness, hardness, smoothness and roughness can be perceived here in many ways due to the high sensitivity of the tongue.

The fire element is also very obvious through the different temperature of the food.

In addition, the elements can be observed in the movements of the tongue against the teeth and in the movement of the lower jaw. Here the air element with pressure and pushing, as in all movements, is mainly to be considered. Softness of the tongue and hardness of the teeth are also very evident in this case.

## **Defecation and Urination**

Here, too, one should perceive all the bodily sensations around emptying according to the characteristics of the elements.

First, as a physical factor, pressure arises at the rectum or in the bladder, then the wish or intention arises, as a mental factor, to visit the toilet. A sequence of movements follows until one reaches the toilet seat. Again, when sitting down, all movements should be closely observed with the characteristics of the elements. One should also carefully distinguish between the mental impulse and the physical movement that follows.

When sitting on the toilet, the mental impulse is followed by the pressure of the air element, which leads to emptying. These processes should be carefully observed. Here the exchange of the elements becomes clear, the earlier absorption of the elements from the outside to the inside as liquids and solids now leads through the emptying to an exchange from the inside to the outside, liquids and solids are released after having been absorbed.

## **Falling Asleep and Waking up**

One can look at the sensations in the body from top to bottom in the lying posture. The supporting of the air element, the heaviness of the earth element, but also the rising fire element, which holds the body in its form, are clear. All other sensations should also be recognized as the characteristics of the four elements.

In all exercises it is important to actually feel, to sense and to immerse oneself completely in the object of contemplation with attention and mindfulness (*sati*). Reflective, intellectual recognition that the ground is hard, the water is hot, etc., without feeling it, does not create the required concentration and mindfulness.

## The Change to the Following Insight Meditation (*vipassanā*)

If we observe continuously in this way, we come more and more to the experience and insight that body and external matter are one. There are the elements that show themselves in various ways, in 'my body', in the bodies of other beings, in nature, in all the objects that surround us.

The healing supporting insight arises that the body is not 'me' or 'I' am the body. There are the elements which change, come into being, pass away, due to conditions. Both the external elements and the internal elements can become out of balance by conditions; on the outside we call it natural disaster (storms, floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes), on the inside disease.

The Buddha says in the Anguttara Nikāya, in the discourse 'The Cattleherd', that a practitioner who cannot analyse materiality cannot make further progress on the Buddhist path of knowledge. He compares such a practitioner to a cowherd who does not know the bodily form of his cows. Then he can neither look after the cows nor count them. He describes the understanding of materiality as the knowledge of the four elements and the material parts that depend on them. If one has not acquired this basic knowledge through one's own experience, one cannot practise insight meditation based on it.

Through four-elements-meditation, one acquires the ability to examine ultimate realities and see their universal characteristics. Insight meditation can only be practised when one has understood both materiality and mentality. The Buddha describes these two parts of our life either summarized in these two areas or he describes the mental in more detail in the five groups of existence (body, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness). These five groups of existence make up our entire life. The Buddha uses them to summarize the first noble truth.

If one wants to develop the noble eightfold path, the fourth noble truth, it is therefore essential to understand the first, which includes, among other things, the analysis and understanding of matter. Without understanding matter and mind, one cannot overcome their causes, the second noble truth. Without having analyzed both body and mind, one cannot recognize their three universal characteristics, impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness. And without realizing these, one cannot attain path consciousness (awakening consciousness) and realize the unconditioned Nibbāna.

If one has not attained full concentration (*jhāna*) with another *samatha* meditation subject, such as mindfulness of the breath, one can use the four elements-meditation as a starting point, both in regard to concentration and analysis, for *vipassanā* insight meditation. Once one has attained *jhāna* concentration with another subject, the four-elements-meditation is the gateway to insight meditation. It is then easier and faster to practise based on the strong concentration of the fourth *jhāna* with another object.