



# Serene and clear: an introduction to Buddhist meditation

by Patrick Kearney

## Week three: Seeing the elements

### The four elements

We have seen that the Buddha's teachings are a first person discourse, because they are concerned with understanding the human condition from the perspective of the experiencing subject herself. They are not based on a third person perspective, like that of a scientist examining an object "out there," something separate from himself. The meditator's concern is to clarify the nature of experience, and this means clarifying her *own* experience. The experiencing subject is the object of investigation.

Only after Freud's "discovery" of the unconscious has Western culture become familiar with something Buddhism has known for over 2,000 years - that the experiencing subject is not given, but formed and constructed over time; not unitary, but inherently divided. We construct both ourselves and the world we experience, forming them from the raw data given by the six senses of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and, in particular, the mind. This process of self and world formation is occurring right now. We think that the self and the world are solid, enduring entities, that they are there waiting for us each morning when we wake up. But actually they are being constructed and dissolved moment by moment. Our normal, taken-for-granted sense of identity is arising and ceasing at this very moment. Insight meditation practice, the systematic investigation of the nature of experience, uncovers this process of arising and ceasing, construction and deconstruction, as it takes place from moment to moment - as it takes place now.

- Extend your hand and with your eyes closed give it your full attention. Allow the hand to relax. Pay close attention to what you feel. What are the sensations you feel? After some time, curl your fingers slowly into a fist. Continue to pay full attention to the sensations, as you curl your hand into a tight fist. What sensations do you feel as you do this?

When I closely examine my experience, now, of "my hand," this familiar hand breaks up into a series of discrete, individual sensations: hardness; movement; sharpness; heat; stickiness; stiffness; and so on. I deconstruct my experience of "hand" as I see the separate factors of experience that together make up the concept "this is my hand." This process of deconstruction through close investigation is *vipassanā*, which literally means "seeing separately." Physical experience, when closely examined, breaks up into a series of discrete sensations, each one of which is an "element" (*dhātu*) of experience. These individual sensations are considered elements because they cannot be broken up any further.

All physical experience, when examined, breaks down into the four "great things" (*mahā-bhūta*) of earth element (*paṭhavī-dhātu*), air element (*vāyo-dhātu*), fire element (*tejjo-dhātu*) and water element (*āpo-dhātu*). Earth element is the experience of resistance, from hard to soft. Air element is the experience of support and movement, such as pressure, vibration,

expansion, contraction, and so on. Fire element is the experience of temperature, from cold to hot. Water element is the experience of liquidity (wetness-dryness) and cohesion (stickiness and its absence). When we examine the breath, for example, we may feel discrete sensations of movement and expansion (air element). If we are focusing on the sensations of the breath at the nostrils, we may feel coolness or warmth (fire element), and wetness or dryness (water element). Last week, when we watched the experience of movement, we were mostly contemplating air element (*vāyo-dhātu*).

Watching the elements is an aspect of the contemplation of body (*kāya anupassanā*), but one which requires our awareness to be very precise and accurate. It is like looking at a movie with the film slowed down until we can see each frame separately, one after the other. This exercise is bound up with the perception of impermanence (*aniccatā*), which we mentioned last week. Perceiving impermanence in the body and mind is central to developing insight. The Buddha explained that we identify with the body and mind, seeing them as *my* body and *my* mind, although when we pay close attention to them we discover that body and mind are undergoing constant change. Convinced that *I am* my body, *I am* my mind, we are threatened by the fact that our lives are continually changing and inherently unstable. We take these changes personally, either fighting against them or grabbing hold of them, but always struggling to take control. We create a personal drama around the changes in our lives, becoming ever more self-preoccupied, and the more we feed our self-preoccupation, the more we suffer. But when we see the impermanence of body and mind clearly and in depth, we see that “what is impermanent is not worth delighting in, not worth welcoming, not worth hanging onto” (*Āneñjasappāya Sutta*). We create a space in which we can drop our obsessive desire to control the universe, and accept the inevitable changes in our lives. In that space we are free to respond appropriately to circumstances. We can respond - be responsible - rather than just react.

We need a strong and penetrating mind to do this contemplation. We must cultivate a powerful, penetrating and sharp attention (*sati*). Developing this powerful and subtle attention is the key to progress in meditation. We are polishing and sharpening the instrument of understanding - the watching mind - by cultivating an ever more subtle and precise discrimination.

Watching elements develops the perception of impermanence because we learn to discriminate precisely *this* from precisely *that*; we learn to aim the attention accurately at just this experience and then see the precise point where *this* experience ends and *that* experience begins. For example, watching the breath I begin with the general concept of “my breath,” and from there learn to discriminate the uniqueness of this inhalation, the uniqueness of this exhalation, and I see the gap between each breath. Looking more closely at a specific inhalation or exhalation, I recognise that a single breath is made up of a package of discrete sensations. I learn to discriminate movement from hardness, hardness from softness, softness from pressure, pressure from vibration, vibration from expansion, and so on. My attention is continuous, and as it strengthens it discriminates more and more, and learns to move from one discrete object to another. I am learning to see change with accuracy and precision. Like all *vipassanā* (insight) methods, watching elements trains the meditator to see the discontinuity of experience. Seeing accurately the particularities of each moment of experience, and seeing accurately the breaks in the flow of experience, we learn to monitor change.

## Naming

This exercise requires and develops precise aim in our attention. To clearly distinguish vibration from expansion in a single breath, for example, requires a great deal of precision.

To cultivate precise aim we use a naming or labelling technique. Naming is closely linked to the mental factor of intention. Remember we defined meditation as the systematic training of attention, and attention as the *deliberate* placing of awareness on its object. Deliberation implies intention. When we make a label and mentally paste it on the object of attention we are cultivating the mental factor of intention, the intention to attend to just this. For example, watching the movement of the breath in the body, at the point where these movements are clearest and most obvious to us, we name the experience as “in” and “out.” Watching more closely and accurately, we begin to discern the specific sensations that together make up the inhalation and exhalation and name them appropriately: “coolness;” “warmth;” “movement;” “expansion;” “vibration;” and so on. The name is like a finger pointing to the object of attention. It serves to precisely identify the object of attention. We do not focus on the name, but the direct experience named; and which name we use is not important.

Similarly, when my attention is drawn to physical sensations in the body, I focus on those sensations and discern their elemental aspects. So, for example, I am watching the breathing, naming it as “in,” “out.” Suddenly I am acutely aware of pain in my back - my attention has just shifted from the breath to painful sensation. I make this pain the centre of my attention, and name it in a neutral, detached and objective manner: “sharpness;” “pressure;” “stabbing;” “heat;” and so on. I look for the predominant way in which the experience of pain presents itself, and name it as such. I avoid naming the experience “pain,” because this name carries a negative emotional charge which is separate from the sensation itself. In this exercise, I am learning to aim attention at the purity of the sensation itself, and I avoid getting caught up in any judgements about the sensation.

Names, of course, are just concepts. They are not the direct experience of body and mind. The four “great things” of earth, air, fire and water provide a system of classification which can be very useful for guiding our meditation. But it is important to avoid trying to impose this conceptual scheme on our experience. Don’t waste time thinking about which of the four elements fits any particular experience. This is just adding more thinking on top of our experience. Simply focus on the direct sensation of hardness, wetness, heat, movement, or whatever, and name it simply and directly, just as you experience it.

We discussed last week that whenever I focus on something, that phenomenon is at the centre of my attention while other phenomena crowd around at the periphery. If I am looking at a program on television I can see other things in my peripheral vision, but I pay them no attention. My focus is elsewhere, directed to the screen. Suddenly there is a movement to my side, I am “distracted,” and I look directly at the person moving across the room. That person is now the centre of my attention, and the television is relegated to being one part of the periphery. Returning to the screen, the television is back at the centre of my attention, while everything else is peripheral. Attention always works like this. It selects one phenomenon as the centre of its focus, and allows what’s happening at the edges to just happen.

Naming the experience is a reminder that right now, this particular object *and no other* is at the centre of my attention. Other things may be crowding around, but I am focused on this one phenomenon. When I am distracted, something else leaps into the centre of my attention, and then I name that new experience and focus on it. At the centre of my attention, that new experience is no longer a distraction; it is my meditation object. Or when my attention becomes so strong that the object clarifies and breaks up into its component parts, one of those parts then becomes the centre of attention. At each of these transitions, these points of change, the naming serves to remind me: “*This* is what I am watching, just this and nothing else.”

## Watching the mind

This brings us to how we incorporate the mind into the practice, beginning with a clear understanding of the dynamics of distraction. It is important to realise that in insight (*vipassanā*) meditation, distraction is not the enemy of the practice, but the content of the practice. Our experience of distraction provides us with a very clear example of the dynamics of change, of impermanence, and with an entry into the contemplation of mind (*citta anupassanā*).

As we discussed last week, usually we know we are distracted when, in the midst of some daydream or conversation with ourselves, we suddenly realise: "I'm distracted! I'm supposed to be attending to the meditation object, but I'm not!" This moment of remembering where we are right now is a moment of pure attention. "Attention" is a translation of the Pāli word *sati*, usually translated as "mindfulness." *Sati* literally means "memory." Why would the Buddha take a word which means memory and turn it into a technical term to mean attention? Let's look again at the process of distraction. What happens at the moment we are distracted? How do we lose the meditation object? We forget. We literally forget the object of meditation. After this forgetting the mind drifts, clinging to whatever presents itself, until suddenly we remember - "I'm supposed to be meditating!" So the opposite of attention is forgetfulness. One classical definition of *sati* (attention) is "remembering the object." A second of attention is a second of remembering the object of meditation. Five minutes of meditation is five minutes of remembering the object. And so on.

So in the moment we spontaneously "snap to attention" and remember what we are doing, that very remembering is an act of attention. In this moment, our distraction is already in the past. Our practice is to create as many of these moments of remembering as possible and to make them as continuous as possible. We begin by being attentive to the meditation object. At the moment we *know* we are distracted, this very knowing of distraction turns distraction into the meditation object. We must avoid our tendency to treat this moment as the opportunity to begin a new narrative: "I'm distracted! Why can't I do this? Better get started again. Now, what am I supposed to be watching?" Instead, we immediately make this very moment a moment of remembering the object: "Thinking;" "thinking." Our basic principle here is: it doesn't matter what the object of attention is; what matters is the continuity of attention.

Watching the process of distraction is like watching the elements. The major difference is that the elements are physical while distraction is mental, but in both instances we are watching the discontinuity of experience, seeing how one experience suddenly becomes another. We are focused on the cusps of experiences, on the edges of things. Naming is one way to keep up with these changes. When we realise we are thinking, we name the experience "thinking," "thinking," and watch that process, the thinking mind. When we realise we are restless, we name the experience "restless," "restless," and watch that process, the restless mind. Where is restlessness? What does it feel like? What is its quality? When we realise the mind is dull, we name the experience "dull," "dull," and watch dullness. Where is it located? What does it feel like? And so on. Once we are satisfied that we *know* the experience, then we return to our central reference point, the contemplation of the body.

The main difficulty with watching the mind is our deeply ingrained habit of identifying with the contents of mind. We are constantly spinning narratives in our minds and, despite the fact that these narratives often contradict each other, as each narrative unfolds we believe it. It defines our reality for as long as it plays. The mind is like a wide screen television with ten thousand channels broadcasting twentyfour hours a day, seven days a week. We each have a remote control device with which we can instantly switch from any

one of these ten thousand channels to any other - although often the device is out of control and chooses channels without our permission. Every channel plays a soap opera, and the star of every soap opera is *me!* All of these soap operas are completely fascinating, and none of them come to an end. These dramas constitute the content of the mind, and in this practice we are not concerned with the *content* of mind, but with the *process* of mind. When I realise that I'm stuck in a fantasy about something, I am not interested in what the fantasy is about. That is completely and utterly irrelevant. What I am interested in is simply the direct experience of fantasy, the process of fantasising.

I do not want to get caught up in the soap opera. It's the difference being absorbed in the drama, and watching the drama with the attitude "I've seen this before," and not getting involved in it. In both cases we are watching the drama, but there is a difference in our relationship to it. In the meditation practice we are not absorbed in the drama, but simply seeing that the drama is playing itself out. We are developing a basic *witnessing* of each and every experience. This basic witnessing involves being present for whatever arises, but simultaneously detached from it.

When you realise you are thinking, just name the experience "thinking; thinking," and watch the fact of thinking. "Dreaming; dreaming." An emotion will grab your attention. Identify it, and attend to it. "Boredom;" "worry;" "sorrow;" "pleasure;" "anticipation;" whatever it is. Watch it. Know what it is. Watch it closely, intimately, but as though at a distance. Do not waste time thinking about it - that thinking is just another drama, another narrative. Just be intimate with the purity of the experience itself. And then return to the breath.

## Standing

Come into the standing posture as we did last week. Beginning with the sense of contact of the feet on the ground, find the basic balance of the body. Move your awareness through the body, feeling the balance through its major segments. Then allow your awareness to drop into the abdomen, and focus on the breath. Your breath is at the centre of your focus, but on the periphery you can feel the entire body. You are not shutting anything out. Anytime you feel any tension or imbalance in the body, relax the tension and return to your vertical axis, your balance. If you are distracted by anything in the mind, name that experience, know it, and return to the body.

Then turn your attention to all those areas of the body where you feel hardness. Do you feel hardness in your feet, where they press against the ground? Do you feel hardness in the legs? In the back? In the neck or shoulders? Slowly scan the body focusing on each point you feel hardness. Aim your attention precisely on that point and name the experience as "hard;" "hard." What happens when you watch hardness? Does it change? How? Then return your attention to the whole posture.

Turn your attention to all those areas of the body where you feel heat or warmth. Again, zero in on this sensation and name it. Where do you feel it most? In the hands? The face? The torso? Do the same for the experience of cold or coolness. What happens when you watch these sensations? Do they change? How? Then return your attention to the whole posture.

Turn your attention to those areas of the body where you feel wetness or moisture. Where do you feel this? In the mouth? Then do the same for the sensation of dryness. Zero in on these sensations, finding the precise location where they occur. What happens when you watch them? Do they change? How?

Turn your attention to those areas of the body where you feel movement or support. Where do you feel movement? In the body as a whole? In the abdomen? In the chest? At the nose? Examine support. Do you feel it in the legs? In the back? How does it appear to you? Again, be very precise in terms of the location of these sensations. When you watch them, do they change? How?

### **Walking**

Maintaining your balance and sense of alignment, begin to walk. In the walking, resume your review of the elements. Begin with hardness and softness; then proceed to warmth and coolness; then to wetness and dryness; and last to movement and support. If you are distracted by anything in the mind, name that experience, know it, and return to the body.

Movement and support may be dominant in walking. Zero in on the purity of the movement of your whole body and of your legs in particular. How do you experience it? Does it change when you watch it? How?

### **Sitting**

Maintaining this sense of balance, sit down on your cushion, bench or chair. Again review the elements of hardness and softness; warmth and coolness; wetness and dryness; and movement and support. Find the movement associated with the breath. Focus on the point where the breath is clearest to you. Is it at the nose? In the chest? In the abdomen? Moving about? Then look for the detail. Again, if you are distracted by anything in the mind, name that distraction, know it, and return to the body.

At what precise point are you focusing on the breath? Does the breath change position during the sitting? In what direction do the movements associated with inhalation and exhalation go? Is the inhalation longer or shorter than the exhalation? Is the inhalation clearer or less so than the exhalation? Is the exhalation clearer or less so than the inhalation? Can you see the beginning, middle and end of each inhalation and each exhalation? If not, what do you see? Does your experience of the inhalation and exhalation change throughout the sitting? How? Above all, *be more precise!*