

Sebene Selassie

*Mindfulness of the Four Elements: Reconnecting with the World*

Week Two: “Water: Going with the Flow”

March 8, 2020



Hi, welcome back to the second week of “Mindfulness of the Four Elements.” I’m Sebene Selassie, and I’m excited to share these teachings with you. I hope you enjoyed practicing with the earth element in your formal practice or your life practice last week. This week we’ll be moving on to the water element.

As I mentioned, this teaching comes from the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the foundational discourse on mindfulness. We explore these elements as a part of mindfulness practice. I want to emphasize again how these teachings help us to develop a capacity for an embodied awareness. We labeled it “mindfulness,” leading us to believe that it’s all about our thinking minds. But *sati*—or what we’ve translated as mindfulness—is an invitation to cultivate an embodied whole-person awareness. In Buddhism, this ability to be aware of everything that’s happening is known as the “fathom-long body.”

We explored earth last week and now we’ll explore all that’s fluid, focusing on the water in the body. I mentioned last week that we are quite disembodied, especially as moderns and Western practitioners, and these teachings can help us connect to the body. We need the help; we’re the only creatures on the planet who are so out of sync with nature. We’re so caught up in our thinking and rational mind that we are out of balance. This elements practice can help us rebalance by noticing which of these elements we’re most connected to, which we’re not, which feel out of balance, and which don’t.

I notice our disconnection and out-of-sync-ness with nature at different times of the year. Right now it’s the holiday season in New York City. It’s winter, and this is an interesting time of year to notice the out-of-sync-ness. We see everything in nature is slowing down and dormant in this northeastern part of the United States—except us. This is the busiest time of year. People are rushing from holiday parties, shopping, gatherings, and visiting family. There’s a lot of stress.

A few years ago, a friend of mine suffered a slight heart attack and when she went to the hospital, they explained to her that she had something called “holiday heart.” The highest number of fatal heart attacks occur on December 25th, December 26th, and January 1st, and they’re called “holiday heart” because people are so stressed out at this time of year. Whether it’s

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our end-of-year fiscal reports at work or dealing with family that we have conflicts with, there's so much tension and so much busyness at a time when we should be resting and rejuvenating.

I believe this element practice is a way to reconnect, to be more in sync, and to become more intimate with our visceral experience with our bodies. As we continue to explore these elements, you may want to notice what feels out of sync or out of balance in relation to the elements in your life and around you.

As we explore this water element, all that is fluid and flowing, you can sense where water and balance are in your life—within and around you. The water element is all that is fluid and flowing in the body. Most of your body is water. An adult human body is 60 percent water. It's actually one of the elements that are harder to feel for me. I can feel the earth element from my head to my feet, I can have that sense of solidity, but I only sense the water element when I sense the saliva in my mouth, or if I close or blink my eyes, I can feel the moistness. I can sometimes feel the sweat on the surface of my skin or dampness or clamminess of different parts of my body. But I can rarely feel the blood coursing through my entire body or the other fluid or lymphatic energies that are part of this mostly-water body.

So this practice is inviting us into an intimate experience of that sense of fluidity and flow. Water hydrates and nourishes us. We can't live without water. That's why that indigenous saying is so true—“Water is life.” We can also explore water externally, and we'll explore that by looking at a part of the *Satipatthana Sutta* called the refrain.

The main part of the sutta is describing different areas that we can pay attention to, whether it's breath, parts of the body, the mind, emotions, patterns, or these elements. The sutta is asking us to cultivate an awareness of this. There is the earth element. There is the water element. There is the fire element. There is the air element. Just simply noticing and paying attention to that. But this refrain—which is repeated over and over again in the sutta, actually 13 times for each area of contemplation—is teaching us how to be with these things, not only to pay attention to them, but to contemplate them in a particular way that helps us see into the nature of reality, and start to develop a capacity for freedom.

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The refrain says that we can contemplate an object—in this case, water—internally, externally, and both internally and externally. There are different interpretations of what exactly these three designations are referring to, but the most obvious and I think the most relevant one for us practicing in our daily lives is that we can experience water internally. The saliva, the sweat, the blood, the tears.

We can also experience it externally. Like our bodies, our planet is mostly made of water; in fact, about 70 percent of the earth is water. Again, it doesn't seem that way. It mostly seems solid or maybe we can sense the air and the atmosphere around us. But 70 percent of this planet, 70 percent of what is around us, is water. This is the external part of the refrain. So, we are mindful of the water internally and then the water externally. The oceans, the rivers, the lakes, the ponds, the streams, the icebergs, the rain, the snow, the fog, the mist. Most of us experience water through our taps: the baths we take, the showers, the water we drink or cook with, the radiator steaming. Water in the background, even in the space that I'm in right now. That's the water element externally.

What is the water element both internally and externally? How do we understand this last part of the refrain asking us to contemplate this relationship of water internally and externally? To me, this is an invitation to understand the inherent interrelationship between all things. Most of the earth is mostly water, we are mostly water, and that water is in a relationship.

Water is a beautiful element and object of contemplation for this part of the refrain, and this part of the sutta, because water *transmutes*. It turns from a solid, to a liquid, to a gas. It's changing forms all the time—leaving us and entering into the atmosphere, falling again, and entering into the earth—in this mysterious process that we're mostly not conscious of. Our perceptual experience of water is different than the actual transmutation and process of water around us. Actually, we're *not* in relationship with most water on a day-to-day basis. 97 percent of the world's water is in its oceans, and most of that is deep water that humans are never in contact with. Two percent of the world's water is in glaciers and icebergs. That leaves a small amount of water that we're in touch with every day. To me, that points to the mystery and profundity of our

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interrelationship of the internal and external. In this way, water becomes a great metaphor for the mystery of our inherent interconnection. Water becomes a beautiful metaphor for the intuitive nature of this practice.

We're not practicing only to logically understand our experience and be able to see and name every occurrence but to also open to the mysterious nature of reality. To contemplate water internally and externally also means to *not know*—to be in that mystery and in that questioning. We can apply this contemplation of what is internal, external, and both internal and external to any of these four elements, and I invite us to practice with that throughout these weeks.

But before we close today, let's practice with the water element. I invite you to find a comfortable seat or, if you'd like, to stand or lay down. Allow the body to relax, release, and soften. Perhaps, you can ground first in the earth element by feeling your connection to the floor, the chair, or the seat.

You may notice sensations, sounds, or thoughts. Allow everything to be just as it is as you begin to connect to this water element. Can you feel what is fluid in the body right now? Is there a sense of flow? Can you sense the saliva in your mouth? The moistness of your eyes? Perhaps gurgling in your stomach? All of this fluid and the blood coursing through your veins is the water element internally. Do you notice any water around you? Is there any sound of water? Perhaps rain, the ocean, or steam? Or perhaps you can sense moisture in the air. The air might be damp or dry. Perhaps you'd like to open your eyes and take a look to see if there's any water visible to you. Perhaps in a vase, a cup, or a cloud. Close your eyes knowing that this is the water element externally.

Now I invite you to contemplate for a moment. What does it mean to be aware of water internally and externally? Can you rest in the mystery of that inherent interconnection of us and our world mostly made of water? I invite you to a sense of appreciation or gratitude for this life-giving element in any way that feels right for you.

<bell chiming>

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I’m inviting you back to connecting with the video. I’d like to remind us that this practice of “Mindfulness of the Four Elements” invites us not only into an awareness of each of these elements—not only paying attention to earth, water, fire, or air—but also to relate to them with a deeper understanding that these elements and any phenomena in our experience are a doorway into understanding our interconnection. To understand the nature within us and around us.

Today we looked at water as the opportunity to notice what's internal, external, and both internal and external. But we can use any of the elements in this way.

This week you may want to take some time to notice water in your life. Notice the water within you. The water that you ingest and release, and also notice the water around you. We don’t need to go to the deepest depths of the ocean or experience a snowstorm to know water. We all engage with water every day by brushing our teeth, drinking, bathing, and cooking. So start to engage with that element of water, knowing that it makes up so much of our lives and our world. Appreciate the notion that water is life. Connecting to this element can help begin to bring a sense of flow into our lives.

For me, metaphorically, water is the realm of emotions. Sometimes I can feel watery; sometimes I can feel dammed up. So I begin to notice how the flow of water is within me, in balance and out of balance, depending on how I’m feeling at any moment in my body—but also metaphorically, emotionally, and mentally.

I hope you enjoyed today’s exploration of this water element. I invite you to explore internally and externally throughout the next week. Next week, we’ll be practicing with the third element, fire, which is the temperature in our lives. We’ll also be looking at another part of the refrain that invites us into a deep appreciation of the nature of impermanence. Until then, I hope you have a great week of practice and living.