

Sebene Selassie

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

Week Three: “Fire: Warming up to Impermanence”

March 15, 2020



Welcome back to the third week of “Mindfulness of the Four Elements.” My name is Sebene Selassie, and I am excited to have you back. I hope you had a great week practicing with the flowing element of water.

This week we’ll be working with the element of fire, which is the temperature in our bodies and our world, and in a broader sense, all that is changing. We’ll also continue our exploration of the refrain—the part of the *Satipatthana Sutta* that’s repeated over and over again—and we’ll look at the part that invites us into a contemplation of impermanence.

Fire is the element of temperature. We usually think of fire as heat. But this element and contemplation are inviting us into an awareness of temperature as it changes. That could be hot or cold, warm or cool, and particularly the fluctuation because it never stays the same. We can experience fire internally by connecting to the warm or cool places in our bodies. You may experience fire as warmth in the groin, belly, chest area, or maybe in the armpits. You may feel the core of the body—like the torso—as warmer than the extremities of the body—like the limbs, hands, or feet. Or it may be the opposite for you. Some people have hot feet and hands. But this practice invites you into a contemplation and awareness of fire, however it manifests in your body. This is fire internally.

Fire externally is epitomized by the sun, that fiery, hot star that keeps this planet alive. We can appreciate the sun’s relative warmth or coolness, heat or coldness, depending on our interrelationship with it. When the planet is farther away or different parts of the planet are hotter and colder, this points to the internal and external dynamics of fire. That interrelationship that we have with the sun, with heat, is constantly in flux.

I experience fire every day through my gas stove, and I have taught myself to remember to experience that as the fire element. That is how these contemplations and this practice of mindfulness of the four elements can begin to affect our everyday lives—when we notice those moments in our day and our lives where we’re in contact with these four elements. You may want to notice, where is fire showing up in your day? Whether it’s hotness or coldness, warmth or cool.

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Last time we explored how this refrain, this repeated part of the sutta, can help us understand our experience of the elements, not just to become aware of them, but to start to see into the nature of reality through a deeper experience and contemplation of these elements. This time, we'll look at the next part of the refrain, which invites us into awareness and contemplation of things arising, things passing away, and things both arising and passing away. Fire is the perfect element to explore this part of the refrain because temperature is always changing. It's never stable.

Impermanence is a central teaching of the buddhadharma. There are many instances in the Pali canon where the Buddha points to the teaching of impermanence as being central and vital to our liberation. It said, “To maintain a perception of impermanence for as little as a finger snap is more important than numerous teachings.” It is said to be more important than generosity, than taking refuge in the triple gem, than undertaking the five precepts, and even than maintaining lovingkindness. An excerpt from the *Dhammapada* [collection of sayings of the Buddha] says, “Better a single day of life perceiving how things rise and fall than to live out a century yet not perceiving the rise and fall.” The Buddha's last words were about impermanence, “I declare to you all conditioned things are of a nature to decay. Strive on untiringly.” There is a famous chant in Theravada Buddhism that is chanted at funerals and almost every day in monasteries, “Anicca vata sankhara.” This chant says, “All things, all conditioned, all phenomena are of the nature to arise and pass away, and to understand this brings true happiness.”

So impermanence is obviously an important teaching. But what does it mean that impermanence is such an important teaching, and why? When we open to what's happening right now, all we can do is notice changes; the fire element is a great place to witness this. Nothing stays the same. We witness it in the breath. We witness it in the body. We witness it all around us at a slower or faster pace. All things are of the nature to decay. This is why in the refrain we're invited into an awareness of things rising, things passing away, and things both rising and passing away. With this instruction, we're refining our capacity to actually witness change so that we can be present for this central and important part of practice.

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The fire element allows us to witness change within our own bodies and around us. All we have to do is pay attention to the temperature in our bodies for a few moments and we'll notice changes. Or we can move around a room and notice the varying temperature when we're closer to the window or when we're farther away, or when we're inside versus when we're outside. We notice changes in temperature throughout the seasons, throughout one day, or throughout one hour; and we can witness these changes through witnessing the fire element within and around us. But we don't like change so we often resist it, and that is why we need to pay attention to it.

One of the advanced teachings of life is called menopause, and I've been experiencing hot flashes for a few years now, and I'll tell you—you really learn about the fire element when you're experiencing a hot flash! <laughs> Most people don't like hot flashes. When I first started experiencing them, I would do everything to get out of them. I'd start taking off layers, or fanning myself, or shoving ice cubes down my shirt. But when I started to practice with it, I realized something simple but profound: that hot flashes are *hot*. That's it. I realized that I could experience the heat rising in the body and inevitably that too would change, and it was actually the change of the heat coming on that was unpleasant. Because when I contemplated, there are a lot of times when I like to be hot. I like to lay down in the sun at the beach. I like to take a hot bath almost every single night in the fall and winter, sometimes even in the spring and summer. I like to go to saunas. So those are times when I will tolerate excruciating heat and find it somehow pleasurable. But when the change of heat arises unbidden in my body, I can't stand it. To me, that shows our discomfort with change.

We like to think that things are certain, that things are solid, and that things are unchanging—especially the things that we're attached to and we like. But when change comes to us unannounced, or when we perceive it to be unpleasant, that's when we can't tolerate change. For me, a lot of this practice is about being able to tolerate whatever is happening. To be able to tolerate the changing temperature, the changing fluidity, the changing moods or thoughts, and the changing patterns in my life. So this invitation to contemplate the elements—to contemplate the fire element changing, arising, and passing away in the body—trains us for this capacity to

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welcome change. To recognize it *not* as something bad or inevitably as a demise, but to celebrate change as a natural part of life.

There's a common modern Buddhist equation that pain times resistance equals suffering. I also think resistance times change equals suffering. When we resist change and are made uncomfortable by any change—including the change of temperature—we create suffering for ourselves. When we can be with change—witnessing it as a natural part of life—we allow ourselves more freedom.

Let's practice a bit with this element of fire and contemplating change, the arising and passing away of phenomena.

Find a comfortable position for yourself either sitting, standing, or laying down. I invite you to close your eyes or gaze softly at the floor or in front of you, and begin to settle into your body right here, right now.

You may feel what's underneath you. The floor. The cushion. The bed. The seat. Connect to the earth element. Feel that solidity and stability of your body and of the earth underneath.

You may notice the water element. What's fluid and flowing internally, or externally, or both internally and externally? Feel the water element within you. Perhaps you can hear or sense water around you.

Now I invite you to begin to connect to the fire element. Notice the temperature of the body. Notice what parts of the body are cool, and which are warm.

Begin to notice any changes in temperature. Perhaps from the coolness or warmth around you. There may even be slight variations.

Notice the arising and passing away of this fire element, without a need to make anything in particular happen. Just open to awareness and contemplation of this element internally, externally, and arising and passing away.

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<pause>

<bell ringing>

I hope that you were able to connect to that practice. Remember the fire element as temperature, as heat, as coolness in our bodies and around us. Metaphorically, fire is also the element of creativity and expression. Of intensity, passion, and anger. We may notice when we are particularly fiery, or when we need to muster some fire in our lives. We can work with this element on the physical level as it's given in this practice. We can also begin to explore it emotionally and mentally in our lives.

Remember the teaching of mindfulness of the four elements invites us to cultivate an embodied awareness of these elements—these metaphors for our experience—so that we can connect to our own bodies and also recognize they're not so different from what's around us, like the earth, water, fire, and air that makes up our whole planet and everything in it. When we understand and contemplate these elements, we open ourselves to so much more. We are able to witness internally and externally and see the interrelationship. We're also able to witness and understand that things arise and pass away, allowing us insight into the central teaching of impermanence.

I hope you enjoyed today's practice, and I invite you to explore the fire element in your life this next week. Next week we'll work with the final element of air and exploring what it means to work with an element that's so ephemeral, light, and always changing, and how this can lead us into an understanding of this final part of the refrain that is a window into letting go.