

Sebene Selassie

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

Week Four: "Air: Breathing with All Beings"

March 22, 2020



Hi, welcome back to this final session on "Mindfulness of the Four Elements." I'm Sebene Selassie, and I'm excited to spend this final week with you exploring the element of air. I hope you had a good time last week exploring the fire element and all that is fiery, or not, in your life. This week we'll be working with this final element—the fourth element of air—and also with the final part of the *Satipatthana Sutta* refrain, which invites us into a contemplation of everything not me, not mine, not myself. This is an invitation to let go of a fixed sense of self.

The element of air is probably familiar to you if you've ever meditated with the breath, which is a popular object of meditation. Air is all that is movable and changeable in the body. We can feel air through the breath coming in and out of the body, which makes air a wonderful element to explore this sense of not me, not mine, not-self.

Air is also a great element to explore all the teachings we've explored so far. Air is internal, external, and both internal and external on a moment-to-moment basis. We can actually witness and experience that process quite easily. Air is also constantly changing. Moment to moment, air is arising, passing away, and both arising and passing away. The element of air, as exemplified by the breath, is a tool or object of meditation in traditions from around the world and from all cultures. Air is essential to our survival and well-being. We can live for several days without food and some days without water, but we cannot last even a few minutes without air. It's vital to our well-being.

The breath is one of the most unique processes in the body. As I mentioned, it's both internal and external. It's both voluntary and involuntary. It balances the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. It's also an empathic process. We often breathe in harmony and rhythm with people we are with, especially those who we love.

The air element also connects you to every breathing being on this planet throughout time, whether that's other mammals breathing in oxygen or plants letting out oxygen. We are connected in this visceral, if ephemeral, way. The researcher Ralph Keeling recently discovered that only about half of our oxygen comes from terrestrial plants, while the rest comes from algae and bacteria in the oceans. Some oxygen even comes from a process of the sun and distant stars.

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So air connects us even celestially. The oxygen we breathe mixes throughout each hemisphere within two months and spreads worldwide in little more than a year. Right now, we are literally breathing the breath of all the beings on this planet, and not only those that are living. As abundant as atoms are in the world, their numbers are finite. There are no more atoms, or less, than there were at the beginning of time. So we're breathing in the air of the Buddha and all who have lived, whether they're villains or heroes. We are breathing in the air of all that have lived and are connected to us, whether they're our ancestors or the ancestors of others. We're breathing in the air of the dinosaurs. We're literally atomically connected to other beings. We breathe in the air of those around us all the time. In and out, internally, externally, arising and passing away. We are molecularly connected to each other.

The final part of the refrain of the *Satipatthana Sutta* invites us to recognize that we've established mindfulness—through contemplating the internal and external, the arising and passing away—and now we can "Abide not clinging to anything in the world." Again, this is a wonderful element to consider this part of the refrain, because it's hard to cling to the air. Try it.

In the *Maharahulovada Sutta*, one of the suttas where the Buddha gives teachings to his son Rahula, he tells Rahula that we can't cling to these elements, and that to contemplate these elements is to contemplate that we are not a fixed sense. He tells Rahula that when we contemplate the air element internally or externally—or any of the elements internally or externally—we become weary with the idea that this is us, this is who we are. He says that anyone who sees this with complete and perfect knowing understands that "This is not mine, this is not me, this is not myself."

The contemplation of "Not mine, not me, not myself" opens us into the depth of the teaching of *anatta*, or not-self. Sometimes we hear that and think it can't be true: "I am a self. Then who is this sitting here?" But the Buddha said he would not answer the question, "Is there a self or is there not a self?" He said that is actually the wrong question. There is a truth to our lived experience, our births, our deaths, and our existence in separate bodies. But that truth does not deny that we are interconnected, that we all originated from this same point, or that there's a mystery to the nature of these bodies and to the nature of ourselves. All the cells in your body are

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comprised of atoms, and an atom is mostly space. The atomic nuclei contains the majority of the matter of an atom, but the size of an atomic nucleus to that of the whole atom is similar to the size of a grain of rice inside a football field. If you added all the atomic nuclei in your body and lined them up side-by-side, they'd amount to a speck of dust. We know now that most of our bodies are water, but most of that water is space. Both of these truths defy our logic of understanding what the self is. The element of air invites us to contemplate *not* being able to grasp at it.

We can experience the element of air as an ephemeral reality that sustains us moment to moment, but air also connects us through time and space to all living creatures in the universe. The universe itself is a mystery. Dark energy and dark matter make up 95 percent of our universe, and they are mostly unknowable to us. We don't know what *95 percent* of this known universe is. String theory hypothesizes that there are probably 12 to 13 dimensions of reality. I can fathom maybe one, two, three, four, or five dimensions, but I have no idea what an eighth or ninth dimension would even consist of. It's been over one hundred years since Einstein told us that space and time, distances and duration, are relative—that they're dependent on different observers in different locations in time and space. He said, "Time is a persistent illusion." He said this over one hundred years ago. And we don't understand it because we don't understand the math, but even those of us who do understand the math can't logically understand what that means for our lives.

But the Buddha tells us that through our awareness, we can start to touch into the mystery of this reality. Ultimately, this body, these elements, and this visceral experience of me sitting here right now, it's not me, mine, or myself. We have this perceptual illusion that we are solid, that we are *not* mostly space, and that we are *not* connected through time to all living beings and matter. We even have the perceptual illusion that time is moving forward. But all of this is relative, and all of this is possible to witness if we deeply contemplate these elements.

The air element is an opportunity to touch into what it means to abide independently—not clinging to anything. The air element opens us to not needing a logical explanation for how or why we practice and to not needing a therapeutic or curative approach to our practice. It's not

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that these things are bad, but they're not the only doorway in this practice. This practice opens us to a deeper and more profound understanding of this mysterious reality that we walk through and live in, every day of our lives.

This practice connects us to the solidity and power of earth, the matter that we came from and return to. It opens us to the fluidity and profundity of water, which makes up most of this planet in the deepest recesses that we will never physically touch but are connected to through the processes of transmutation and evaporation. We're connected through the temperature of fire—the heating and cooling of our planet—which is now at dangerous levels and inviting us to rebalance so that we can correct the dire trajectory we're headed in. And it connects us to the power of this ephemeral, but expansive, quality of air, which connects us to everything around and within. All our cells are touched by air, along with all the cells of all the beings who also breathe air in and out. The air element connects us to time and space.

Let's practice all these aspects of the four elements in our final meditation together. I invite you to find a comfortable way of sitting, standing, or lying down—a way that allows you to feel grounded in earth, flowing with water, connected to the temperature of fire, and connected to the quality of air. So settle into your seat, and allow the body to soften and relax into this moment.

Sense the earth element in you, solid and stable, resting on this ground underneath.

Allow that solidity, that stability, to hold you as you connect to the water element. Sense all that is fluid and flowing, any moisture that you sense in the body, in the air around you, internally and externally.

Allow yourself to notice any fire element and the temperature arising and passing away. Notice any fluctuations of warmth or coolness in various parts of the body.

As you connect to the air element, I invite you to sense the breath in whatever way feels easeful and most prominent for you right now. Sense the air element entering the body as you breathe in, sense air leaving the body as you breathe out.

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Notice this natural process of letting go with each out breath.

Without any need to cling to this element, know that the next breath will arrive and continue to sustain this body without effort, without struggle.

What does it mean to not cling, to abide independently here, breathing in and out without clinging to anything in the world?

Simply allow this breath to be enough.

Let go with each out breath.

Know this breath connects you throughout time and space.

Can you simply allow this moment and this breath?

<bell chimes>

It's been wonderful to spend these four weeks with you exploring the "Mindfulness of the Four Elements" practice. I hope that you've benefited from exploring these practices and the way they help us connect to nature within us and around us. The way they open us to the depth of these teachings, of interconnection, of impermanence, of not-self, of our ability to let go and find freedom in any moment by connecting to this body through earth, water, fire, and air. Thank you so much for spending this time with me and I hope to see you again soon.