

The six-element practice

The fourth of the five basic methods, **the six-element practice**, is an antidote to the mental poison of conceit (*māna*). This is a strongly held self-identification. Conceit is not so much a deluded conviction that you're wonderful as it is the universal assumption that 'I am me', that you know what you are and really believe that is you. This (completely normal) attitude is narrow and proud. There is no humility in relation to the vastness of being and time.

The six-element practice meditation is an investigation of what really makes up this self in terms of the elements of existence. Traditional societies throughout the world have viewed human experience in terms of earth, water, fire and air, to which some ancient Indian traditions added space and consciousness. These six elements describe the psychophysical reality of living, with all its variations of solidity, wetness, heat, movement, space and awareness. Here is everything you could possibly identify with as a self. The practice is to dwell on each element, seeing the way each manifests naturally in the world. Next, turning to its manifestation within

your own body and mind, you reflect that you cannot regard this as your own. Then you let go of that deeply held conviction. In reality, you consciously created neither your body nor your mind, and have no control over their continual changes. So what aspect of your experience can you call 'me'? By wondering about this, you begin experiencing yourself more as a continually changing flux

of processes. The practice ideally begins in the first dhyāna or access concentration, and you need to make sure that you are in a state of clear concentration and positive emotion. Then you reflect upon each element as follows, allowing (say) ten minutes for each.

The earth element represents everything that is perceived as solid and resistant. So first get a sense of that quality by recalling houses, cars, roads, trees and rocks outside in the world. Then come back to yourself and feel that same quality of relative hardness in bones, sinews, muscles, hairs, skin etc. Spend whatever time it takes to settle into a sustained mindfulness of the body's earth quality. This is also an image, or felt sense, that is not really describable in words. Now look into the real nature of this quality. Notice how you identify with bones, hair etc. as 'me' and think of them as your own. Connect with the feelings this arouses. If your hair fell out or went grey or if you lost a limb in an accident, wouldn't it somehow feel as though *you* had lost something? But though conventionally everyone regards these relatively solid parts of the body as 'mine' and feels strongly about that too, you cannot say that you actually possess them. Who possesses what? You have certainly played no conscious part in their creation. The earth element in your body naturally formed itself; your body grew automatically as you put food into it. You can't truly regard it as your own. As you will have to give it up one day, it is more as though you have borrowed it for a while. You cannot predict when or how you will die; but when that happens, the earth element in your body will once again

become part of the earth element in the universe outside. It is the earth element now and it will be earth in the future too. The process doesn't involve a self at all, and doesn't need to – life works fine without one.

In many ways this is quite straightforward. It is just that normally you don't look into such things. It is easy to see that both the inside and the outside aspects of solid physical experience – you and the world you live in

– have always had the same nature of earth. So conclude the stage of earth by sitting in acceptance of this basic reality and absorbing its lessons. This same pattern is followed in each of the six stages: get a sense of the elemental quality by recalling its form in the outside world; then feel that in your body; next feel how you identify with it as a self; then reflect that actually it cannot be a self – it is simply the element; and, finally, let go of the clinging to it as 'me'.

The water element refers to everything that flows downwards, that drops, that dribbles and splashes, that oozes, drips or forms into puddles. In the outer world, for example, there are seas, oceans and great lakes, rivers and streams, clouds and raindrops. In your body too there are many varieties of fluid, such as tears, joint-lubricant, sweat, urine, blood, mucus, saliva and digestive juices. Again, these have been 'borrowed' from outside. And again in the meditation practice you reflect that all will inevitably have to be 'returned' when the body breaks up and becomes part of the universe at large. Though you may feel a sense of

identification and possessiveness about it, you nevertheless cannot claim any ownership of the water element.

The fire element comprises everything to do with *relative* heat and cold. In the outside world there is, above all, the sun. There is hot and cold weather; there are volcanoes, hot springs, frozen seas, glaciers and icebergs. Nearer home, there are man-made fires and heating systems. In you there is the heat caused by physical exertion and the digestive processes. Heat is involved in the body's processing of food as its fuel and in the need for clothing to keep your body warm or cool. But when death comes, your body will gradually lose all its heat. That was not your own warmth in any real sense, for it is entirely dependent upon the natural processes involved in maintaining a body. In accepting this fact, in coming to terms with it, let the fire element go back, in imagination, to its source. Without clinging on to it, without thinking that it is yours, let the borrowed fire element in the body return to the fire element in the universe.

The air or wind element is movement – every kind of vibration within or streaming through space – just as the wind blows everywhere and air flows in and out of countless bodies giving life and breath. Imagine the all-pervasiveness of air and its vast movements through space, along streets

and round city buildings, across immense land masses – mountains, oceans, deserts – sometimes hot, sometimes cold, sometimes moving, sometimes still, carrying with it

fumes and fragrances of every kind, coloured by every kind of light and shade. You can also notice the movements of the various ‘winds’, the vital energies, breath and inner motions within your body. Reflect too that you cannot possess the air or the process of breathing or any other body process in any way. You cannot reasonably identify yourself with the air element any more than you can with earth, water or fire. It is not yours. It is not you. It is not part of you. You are not part of it. Even though you *feel* it is yours – and feel, above all, that you would be losing something if its movement in your lungs were to stop – you try to realize the illusion and to accept that these are impersonal processes that go on regardless of any feelings of ownership. It is just the air element.

The space element is that in which all the other elements exist, and it is infinite: you are surrounded by this inconceivable vastness containing all beings and all worlds and within which your body occupies a minute portion. You also enclose space, forming a ‘me’-shaped space that you identify with. But consider: how can this space actually be yours except in a very temporary sense? Like the other elements, it is ‘borrowed’ just for the time that the body exists. At death the earth, water, fire and air elements dissolve and the space that was ‘me’ will simply join the space which was ‘not-me’. At this point in the meditation you reflect on this, accepting that you cannot identify yourself with the space your body occupies. It is just space.

The consciousness element refers to your experience of perceiving things, whether they are thoughts, memories

perceived in the mind or objects perceived through the senses. That is, you see, hear, smell, taste and touch things – and also think, feel, remember and imagine things. All these are ways in which you are conscious of things. So first get a feeling for this element; get an image. Notice all the perceptions coming and going. Attend, for example, to sensations in the body, listen to sounds, notice ideas and notice the quality of perception itself – the feeling of it, the way it happens. Recall that other people, animals and the great diversity of other beings around you are also conscious in various ways. Ask ‘Is this me or mine?’ It would be unusual if you didn’t think of the mind as somehow ‘me’; but look closely into it and see how that can actually be, what that claim really means.

As with the body, this experience of consciousness has arisen naturally without having been wished for; and it changes in every instant in the same way. You can sometimes control its direction, just as you can more or less control your arms and legs – but you can’t control its nature or the way it arises. As this consciousness too is beyond our control, then even it cannot be yours. Once again, you need to accept the fact that consciousness is ‘borrowed’ and one day will return to the consciousness element as similarly ‘owned’ by other beings throughout the universe. What exists is just consciousness: it is neither your consciousness nor something other than consciousness. What exists is ownerless consciousness, and that is fine: owners are unnecessary, just abstractions. The interaction of ownerless

elements, including consciousness, is simply how everything works, how it actually is.

Thus in the six-element practice you dissolve attachment to every aspect of experience and abandon the limiting idea of a self. If no self is found in earth, water, fire, wind or consciousness, where else can it possibly be? Sit in meditation experiencing the constantly changing phenomena of the mind, seeing that it is all perfectly ownerless. Even the perceiving mind is an impersonal process, and the whole phenomenon of personal existence, though thoroughly real as an experience, is conditioned by that partial view of reality.

*There is no doer of a deed
Or one who reaps the deed's result; Phenomena alone flow on –
No other view than this is right ...*

*The kamma [i.e. action] of its fruit is void; No fruit exists yet in the kamma;
And still the fruit is born from it,
Wholly depending on the kamma.*

*For here there is no Brahma god, Creator of the round of births, Phenomena
alone flow on –
Cause and component their condition.*

Buddhaghosa⁷⁹

This meditation is deeply stimulating and very effective. The way in which I have described it emphasizes *anattā*, non-self. But the practice is often done as a kind of reflection on impermanence – especially in terms of the dissolution of the body, the emphasis being on the fact that death will come. The physical elements are not yours because at death earth will decompose, water will flow

away or dry up, your body will lose its heat and become cold, the breathing will stop and you will no longer occupy this you-shaped space.

A poem by Sangharakshita demonstrates the spirit of this approach and gives an inspiring positive emphasis on the unlimited nature of space, the indefinable nature of mind and the mystery of being.

The Six Elements Speak

I am Earth.

I am rock, metal, and soil.

*I am that which exists in you As bone, muscle, and flesh, But now I must go,
Leaving you light.*

Now we must part. Goodbye.

I am Water.

*I am ocean, lake, rivers and streams, The rain that falls from clouds
And the dew on the petals of flowers.*

I am that which exists in you

*As blood, urine, sweat, saliva and tears, But now I must go,
Leaving you dry.*

Now we must part.

Goodbye.

I am Fire.

I come from the Sun, travelling through space To sleep in wood, flint, and steel.

I am that which exists in you

*As bodily heat, the warmth of an embrace, But now I must go,
Leaving you cold.*

Now we must part. Goodbye.

I am Air.

I am wind, breeze, and hurricane.

I am that which exists in you

*As the breath in your nostrils, in your lungs, The breath that gently comes, that
gently goes, But now I must go,*

For the last time,

*Leaving you empty.
Now we must part.
Goodbye.*

*I am Space.
I contain all,
From a grain of dust to a galaxy.
I am that which exists in you
As the space limited by the earth, water, fire, and air That make up your physical
being,
But now they have all gone
And I must go too,
Leaving you unlimited.
Now we must part.
Goodbye.*

*I am Consciousness.
Indefinable and indescribable.
I am that which exists in you
As sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and thought,
But now I must go
From the space no longer limited by your physical being Leaving nothing of
'you'.
There is no one from whom to part,
So no goodbye.*

*Earth dissolves into Water,
Water dissolves into Fire,
Fire dissolves into Air,
Air dissolves into Space,
Space dissolves into Consciousness, Consciousness dissolves into – ?*

HUM

Sangharakshita, Summer 2002

Whichever of these slightly different approaches is taken, the six-element practice will almost certainly throw you back on the lack of clarity in your views. When your view is unclear, you sit to do the meditation but waste your

energy wrestling with intellectual doubts. You need to feel confident that – to give just one example –when your body no longer exists, your present mode of consciousness will no longer exist. If that is clear, you’ll be happy simply to dwell on that idea and let it soak in, transforming your whole being. If not, you are likely to lose your concentration and be tossed this way and that, thinking ‘Well, does consciousness *end* at death then? How can I be sure that it does? Am I expected to know that from experience?’ and so on. You’ll be thrown back into the stage of reflection, which of course is valuable too. Pursuing *prajñā*, you encounter truth- concepts that are like that irritating speck of grit in an oyster that is supposed to cause the formation of a pearl. You need to be able to trust these somewhat indigestible nuggets of wisdom, at least provisionally. The questions that arise and the need for clarification are very necessary and not to be suppressed, even though they are not meditation. As I have said, some intellectual preparation and study is necessary for a practice like this, as well as some contact with an experienced teacher.

Stūpa visualization

There are several practices connected with the six elements in Buddhist tradition. For instance, there is a section on the four elements in the body awareness portion of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the primary teaching on mindfulness. One that I have found to be very effective is the visualization of the six-element *stūpa*. This employs simple images similarly to the *kasiṇa* meditations. Various forms of

the Buddhist stūpa are well known from Nepal to Japan. They were originally monuments for holding remains of Buddhas or other saints, and are often honoured by circumambulation as though they themselves are actually Buddhas.

The stūpa represents the six elements because they are what you were produced from at birth and what are given up at death. The classic stūpa consists of six symbols representing the elements assembled vertically from ground level, with the symbol for earth and the other elements arranged above one another in order of subtlety.

Occasionally only four, or even just two, elements are represented. The Buddha is said to have designed the first stūpa in the simplest possible form. Asked what kind of burial mound would be appropriate after his death, he silently folded a yellow robe into a cube shape, placed it on the ground and laid upon it his upturned begging bowl. So the yellow cube symbolizes **earth**. Square shapes express some of the qualities of earth: solidity, strength, support and so on. As you visualize this, you are not required to get a clear, stable picture; you need only get a sense of the symbol's earthy quality – some feeling, sensation or other impression that enables you to dwell easily on the earth element. Use direct sense experience as well, noticing, for example, the solid floor supporting you or the hardness of your teeth and nails.

Then, above the cube, imagine the **water** element, represented by a white dome or a globe like the full moon. The water element certainly expresses

the quality of flowing, but then fire and air also flow. The distinctive elemental character of water is its cohesion. So the white sphere is like a bubble or a drop of water that in nature holds together as though by magic. To engage more with the water element, notice the wetness of your eyes and tongue – and also swallow, triggering an experience of the liquid nature throughout the body. Getting more deeply involved with the elements can be unusually satisfying, and there is perhaps some relief in being able to acknowledge a level of experience that is present in everyone before they are even born. You were intimate with the elements well before you were self-aware. The energy of earth is stable and unmoving; the holding energy of water moves only inwards and downwards. With the fire element, the energy radiates only outwards and upwards. Fire is symbolized by a bright red cone, rather like a flame. As you allow this new form and its colour to influence you, the qualities of temperature and light in your present experience become clearer. Notice, for example, that your eyes are actually receiving light and that your body is warm.

Above that, the symbolic element of **wind** or air is a pale green dish shape, delicate like porcelain. At least that is how I imagine it. You are free to play around with these forms. They can be lively and even comical. I see wind like a sensitive satellite dish, picking up sensations and vibrating with them, or like a pale green frisbee juddering as it skims through space.

The air element is not about air as a gas; here ‘air’ is a symbol for movement. Thus the alternative term is

‘wind’ (Sanskrit: *vāyu*), which expresses that essential moving characteristic as found in the pulsing of the blood, the tidal flow of breathing and the progressive relaxation of the muscles as the body stills in meditation posture. In deep meditation, the movements within the body’s subtle energy channels become apparent. These are known as winds (*lung*); and if you watch very closely and gently, the play of thoughts and emotions is sometimes observable in particular parts of the body, riding as though upon flowing breezes. Everything that exists, inside and outside, not only has movement but also often moves in different ways at the same time. Even if something could be completely solid and stable, which is impossible, it would still be moving, for the

planet itself is moving in several ways. Thus the element air spreads out simultaneously in all directions.

No movement, temperature, coherency or stable matter can exist without **space** to contain it. The element of space is symbolized by a single point, a ‘drop’ that is gently flaming, showing its vibrant living quality. Elemental space is not a vacuum. The single point symbolizes the fact that space is everywhere all at once: it is infinitely out there and is also infinitely ‘in here’, in the endless microspaces in the body. Notice how distinctly (and also how emotionally) you are sometimes aware of the particular location of various parts of your body. Everything has to take place somewhere. So this ‘flaming jewel drop’, as it is sometimes called, stands for the fact that this space *here* is one of an infinite number of possible points.

Finally, the element of consciousness or **awareness** is the ‘space’ within which space itself happens. This is not to imply the solipsism that ‘it’s all in the mind’ but to offer the simple reminder that whatever the ultimate truth may be, earth, water, fire, movement and space are all experienced by the mind. So you can call this the element of ‘experience’. Philosophical questions about whether or not the elements take place outside experience and exactly how they might be interesting to contemplate but they are not relevant here. This creates a rare and precious opportunity to dwell on the experience of experiencing itself. Is this sensation ‘me’ or is it ‘mine’ – or what is its nature otherwise? This most basic of all the elements is symbolized by an open sky, which is clear, blue and boundless.

In fact, the practice begins here. Start with the blue sky and let it contain, in order one by one, the symbols for earth, water, fire, wind and space. The stūpa of the elements, surrounded by clear blue sky, symbolizes your entire experience and response to a world filled with many sensations of resistance, cohesiveness, temperature and movement in space. As you connect with each element through its symbol, experience its special qualities directly in the body as much as you can; appreciate its particular life-energy, its role in your existence. Once the connection is there, you reflect that, despite your habitual attitudes, this characteristic of your body experience is not something that you can possibly own in any literal way. Its nature is completely free, and you can let go fully into that quality of

freedom. For that letting go to be meaningful, you need to acknowledge and to feel the particular ways you grasp experiences and sensations as ‘me’ or ‘mine’. These may not be obvious at first. In the end, the practice requires a commitment to the deepest reflection and a genuine desire to enquire into what really happens in the thoughts and feelings you have about yourself and the world. This will come in time if you want it to – depth and skill come from applying these reflections in a sustained way.

Ending the practice is done in a special way, to reflect that profound process of letting go. Just as they were conjured up in the blue sky of awareness, now the elemental symbols all dissolve back into it. In turn from the top, each symbolic form melts and dissolves into the element beneath: the space element melts down and is absorbed into the wind element, then wind melts into fire, fire into water and water into earth. The earth element melts into the sky. The sky itself dissolves like mist, and gradually you return once more to the direct experience of the six elements as again and again they emerge, solidify and dissolve in the course of daily life.

If pursued, this meditation will develop real, living connections to the elements and with nature generally, helping you to live more ethically and in harmony with the earth. If you want, it can become a special eco-Dharma practice. All Buddhist meditation methods can have this kind of effect, since all of them include mindfulness of the physical body. The same feeling of harmony arises as you engage with other Buddhist methods such as ethics,

wisdom, right livelihood, study and community. It is not surprising that the stūpa is held in such high honour in the East, representing as it does both the wonders of the natural world and the amazing nature of the Buddha which can be awakened in all of us.



