

IV

ELEMENTS

Contemplation of the four elements is the second spoke in the wheel of practice I am presenting here. Here are the relevant instructions from the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (MN 10):

One examines this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, by way of the elements: “In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the wind element.”

THE ELEMENTS AS QUALITIES

In early Buddhist thought the elements represent qualities. A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* describes how a skilled practitioner can consider a tree as a manifestation of each of the four elements (AN 6.41; Anālayo 2003: 150n138). However solid it appears, a tree is not only a manifestation of the earth element. It can similarly be seen as a manifestation of the water element, the fire element, or the wind element. The reason is that each of these qualities is present in a tree. Besides the wood, there is sap and temperature in the tree, and motion takes place inside of it. This illustrates the orientation of the early Buddhist analysis of matter into elements, which concerns mere qualities; it does not posit a form of essentialism or atomism.

As qualities, the earth element represents the principles of hardness, resistance, and stiffness, the water element liquidity, wetness, and cohesion, the fire element the domain of temperature, manifesting as different degrees of warmth and heat, and the wind element the principle of motion, vibration, and oscillation.

To gain a sense of each of these elements, we could grit our teeth to get a feel for hardness as a manifestation of the earth element. The earth element is found throughout the whole body, but it is particularly evident in the bones. Next we could gather the spittle in our mouth and swallow it. Then we notice how the dryness in our mouth is gradually being replaced by wetness as spittle again accumulates in the mouth. The water element is found throughout the body, but it is particularly evident in the various bodily liquids. Rubbing our hands together we can feel heat. The fire element is found throughout the body, but it is particularly evident on the skin level. Taking a deep breath, we are aware of the motion of oxygen. The

wind element is found throughout the body, but it is particularly evident in the constant motion of breath moving in and out of the body.

According to later tradition, the water element cannot be experienced directly. Although an adult human body consists of up to 60 per cent of water, this is indeed the one out of the four elements that is not easily felt distinctly. However, I would argue that the exercise suggested above regarding spittle shows that it is possible to have a distinct sense of wetness as a manifestation of the water element. The same holds for the felt sense of other bodily liquids, such as sweat, tears, urine, etc. Apart from bodily liquids, another experience that points in the same direction is when we sit on a seat that we did not notice was wet. The wetness gradually penetrates through our clothing until it reaches the skin of our buttocks, at which point we suddenly realize: "Oh no, this is wet!" I take this as a direct experience of the water element.

In a wider sense, the water element stands for the principle of cohesion. This can be related to the formation of hydrogen bonds between molecules. Hydrogen bonds also occur in proteins and DNA. This makes it indeed seem meaningful to view the water element as exemplifying connectedness, the bonding together of things as opposed to their falling apart. Wet clothes stick to the body, wet paper sticks to the wall, and so on.

Similar to the contemplation of the anatomical parts, in the present case it is also not necessary to strain ourselves in order to feel distinctly each and every aspect of the manifestation of the four elements in the body. The map we are using for our practice is in accordance with reality. Matter is indeed made up of some degree of solidity, some degree of cohesion, it has some temperature, and it is in constant motion within. There can hardly be any doubt about the accuracy of this map. Since this map is in accordance with reality, it is not necessary for us to conduct sustained research in order to ascertain the correctness of this map in every single part of our body. It is sufficient, for our present purposes, to combine awareness of the body with the knowledge derived from this map.

Contemplation of the elements could be compared to receiving a parcel meant for someone else. There is no need to open the parcel and

search its contents. It is enough to look at the address label, realize that this parcel is not mine, and return it to the postman. The main thrust of contemplation of the elements is to realize that none can truly be considered "mine". Just as we do not need to search through the contents of a parcel that does not belong to us, so it is with the elements. There is no need to search through the whole body for each of them. There is also no need to analyse a particular sensation in an attempt to determine which element this precisely corresponds to. The contemplation is about the four elements as together making up the physical reality of the body, independent of how and in what way their actual interrelation manifests. It is enough for us to know that, however the elements manifest, they are not mine; they are empty of a self. The gist of the practice is simply about no longer taking the body so very personally and learning to relate to it without self-investment.

A PRACTICAL APPROACH

For actual practice I suggest using the same scanning method already employed for the contemplation of the anatomical parts. Starting with the head we move down to the feet, contemplating the earth element. During this scan we are aware of the whole body pervaded by the earth element, with particular attention given to the skeleton, as this is the most prominent manifestation of the earth element. For the water element I suggest moving up from the feet to the head, and again from the head down to the feet for the fire element, and finally once more from the feet up to the head for the wind element. Each time we are aware of the whole body being pervaded by the respective element.

At the same time, we might note that the water element is particular prominent in the bodily liquids found in the fleshy parts of the body. The fire element is quite evident on the skin level, as this part of the body is specifically sensitive to temperature. The wind element is especially noticeable in the process of breathing.

As we practise in this way, the body scans for the elements build on the scanning done for the anatomical parts. To some degree the elements earth, water, and fire correspond to the earlier distinction of the body's anatomy into bones, flesh, and skin. A difference is that during the earlier practice there was a stronger focus on the bones as standing out prominently against the rest of the whole body. When contemplating the earth element, the bones become a considerably

more integral dimension of the whole of the body. The same holds for flesh and skin.

In addition to these three, a new aspect of practice enters the scene with the wind element, representing any motion of or in the body. Motion manifests with particular prominence in the breath. Just as skin, flesh, and bones in a way build a bridge from the anatomical parts to the elements, so too the breath builds a bridge from the elements to the third body contemplation, to be taken up in the next chapter.

Regarding the experience of the breath, I recommend that each practitioner decide where and in what manner the breath can most readily be felt. Some prefer to note the process of breathing through attending to the sensations below the nostrils and above the upper lip. Others prefer the inside of the nostrils or the back of the throat. Others aim at the movement distinguishable in the chest area or the rise and fall of the abdomen. Still others prefer to be aware of the breath without focusing on a specific location.

For the mode of practice that I present here, it does not matter at all. Whatever works best for us to get a clear sense of the distinction between breathing in and breathing out is the right way to proceed. The only point to be kept in mind is that the breath is best experienced as part of an awareness of the whole body. It should not become the object of an all-out focus on the breath alone.

Besides the process of breathing, the impact of the element wind also becomes apparent when we notice slight motions of various types taking place in the body. On a subtle level the body is in continuous motion, and most of this happens without our conscious intention; in fact usually we do not even notice it. This discovery already serves as a pointer to the main insight dimension of contemplation of elements, which is the empty nature of the body.

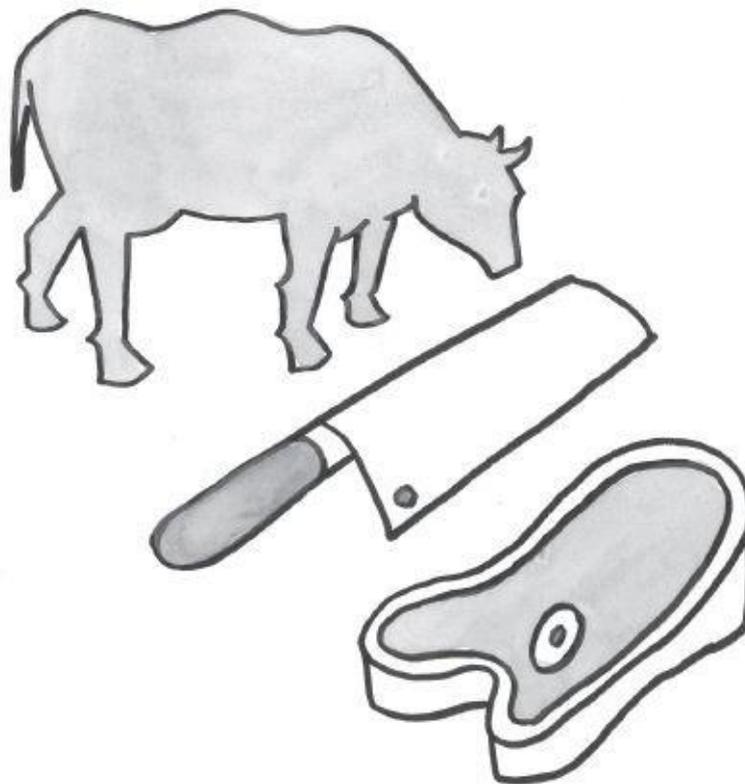
When shifting from sitting to walking meditation, the earlier cultivated awareness of skin, flesh, and bones during walking could be continued, viewing each as a prominent exemplification of the first three elements of earth, water, and fire. The fourth element of wind naturally becomes evident in the very fact that the body is now moving rather than stationary.

Whereas contemplation of the anatomical constitution of the body during walking meditation is in particular concerned with non-attachment, with the elements attention instead shifts to the empty nature of the walking experience. We train ourselves to let go of any identification with the walking body. The gist of such practice could be summed up with the injunction: “walk without (any notion of) a walker!”

THE SIMILE

The purpose of contemplation of the elements finds illustration in a simile in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which proceeds as follows:

It is just as a skilled butcher or a butcher’s apprentice who, having killed a cow, were to be seated at a crossroads with it cut up into pieces.



It is remarkable that the rather challenging exercise of deconstructing the notion of bodily beauty through contemplation of the anatomical parts uses the comparably soft illustration of a bag full of grains. In contrast, the present exercise comes with this gruesome depiction of a butchered cow. Given the high regard afforded to cows in ancient India and the emphasis among practitioners like the Jains on not harming any living being, the example seems intentionally shocking.

The implication of this simile becomes particularly evident in the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. This version

describes how, once the butcher has cut up the cow, he sees various parts of the cow as: “these are the feet”, “this is the heart”, “these are the tendons”, and “this is the head” (Anālayo 2013: 82). In other words, what earlier for him was a “cow” now has become pieces of meat for sale. The presentation in the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel is in accordance with the understanding in the Pāli commentary (Anālayo 2003: 151).

Just as the butcher cuts up the cow into pieces of meat, in the same way we can butcher up clinging to a sense of selfhood and cut it into pieces. I take it that the strong nuances conveyed by the simile are intended to drive home the need to carry out this practice to its successful completion. Clinging to a solid sense of self is in fact the main culprit responsible for a broad range of problems and afflictions. The task is to leave behind the notion of “my body” as a compact unit that can be owned and that is substantially different from other bodies. Instead, it is to be seen as just a combination of the four elements, similar in this respect to all other manifestations of matter.

THE EMPTY NATURE OF MATTER

All forms of discrimination based on gender or race can be butchered by attending to the elements. We are all composed of these same elements. Once this is realized, material distinctions between human beings are revealed to lack any true substance. According to quantum physics, this body is for the most part just empty space. The physical difference between the beautiful young model on stage and the old beggar by the side of the road is so minimal as to be negligible. How could such a difference be truly significant? What basis do we really have for identifying ourselves as a member of a particular group with certain physical marks considered to be fundamentally different from another group with other physical characteristics?

It is not only alleged differences between human beings that can be butchered with this exercise. The whole material world is made up of these four elements. Whether inside this body or outside of it, there is just earth, water, fire, and wind. The gradual diminishing of the assumption of a substantial difference between manifestations of these elements internally as “me” and externally as “others” undermines the very foundation on which craving and attachment rely.

The *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* relates the four internal elements to

their external counterparts found outside in nature (MN 28; Anālayo 2003: 152). Both internal and external manifestations of the elements are similarly impermanent. They share being subject to the same law of change. This puts an additional spotlight on impermanence.

Contemplation of the elements can naturally lead from internal elements within the body to external manifestations of the elements outside of the body, culminating in an appreciation of their impermanent nature. Having proceeded from the head to the feet, experiencing the hardness of the earth element internally, we could for a moment sense the hardness of the ground on which we sit as an exemplification of the hardness of all matter around us. In preparation for the next scan we might notice the lack of separation between the meditation seat and our buttocks. Although in this case the lack of separation is because of the pressure of the weight of the body, the sense of connectedness to the meditation mat requires the cohesion of the water element in those bodily parts that touch the meditation mat. Therefore it does seem possible to take this physically felt connectedness to the ground as an exemplification of the cohesion responsible for the material particles of this body not just falling apart into disconnected specks of dust.

Beginning the scan for the fire element we might briefly attend to the sensed feeling of the outside temperature around the head area (or just the face if the head is covered by clothing), before moving on to experiencing manifestations of the fire element within the body. With the wind element we could broaden our perspective from experiencing the breath inside the body to noting how air comes from the outside and on exhalation returns to the outside. The suggestion here is not meant to encourage following the breath as it leaves the body, but only to broaden our perspective so that the external dimension is encompassed as well.

By attending briefly to these external dimensions without allowing them to distract us from the actual practice of being in the body, the interdependence between the body and outside nature becomes more a matter of personal experience. The narrow sense of selfhood can be allowed to dissolve in the vastness of nature around us. In a way looking at nature externally can seem as if we are looking in a mirror. All that is there internally and externally is just the elements. We learn

to overcome the limitations of our confined sense of bodily identity by becoming part of something larger. The body is just part of nature; it is made up of these four elements just like the rest of nature outside. This body does not really belong to us; it belongs to nature, it has been borrowed from nature, and it will eventually return to nature when the four elements fall apart at the time of death.

Our existence is entirely dependent on the outside world, and both are merely changing processes. The division we tend to create between the elements in this body as something “I am” and manifestations of the elements outside of this body as something substantially different from what “I am” is being put into question. At what point exactly does it feel right to consider food to have become “my body”: is it when I have it on my spoon, in my mouth, when I chew, or when I swallow it? At what point does it lose the right to this qualification: when it leaves the stomach, when it proceeds from the small to the large intestine, or only when it is excreted?

Moreover, the assumption to believe we are in control, evident in the tendency to seek to own material things, is similarly being questioned. In truth and fact, the elements are not something we can fully control or permanently own.

The sense of being different from outside nature, in combination with the conceit of ownership and control, is the chief culprit for many a problem. The destruction of the natural environment, pollution, and climate change have acquired dimensions that threaten the very survival of the human race. It is high time for us to realize that we cannot continue to live in this way. Contemplation of the elements can make a substantial contribution towards deepening this realization. The elements inside and the elements outside are not different in principle. They are part of one single continuity. It is our responsibility to take care of nature outside just as much as we take care of our own body.

Contemplation of the elements offers a convenient entrance into what could be considered the most central dimension of insight in early Buddhist thought: not-self (*anattā*). The same could alternatively be captured with the term “empty”, in the sense that everything is empty of a self. The term “self” in such contexts can be misunderstood. The statement that there is no self does not mean that

there is nothing at all. “Self” here refers to a permanent and substantial entity, something that is able to exert complete control. Such an entity cannot be found in any aspect of experience. This is what emptiness in early Buddhism is about. Actually emptiness in early Buddhism is about being empty of something. The body is empty of a permanent self that is in control. That is precisely why the body is not always the way we want it to be, why it becomes sick and eventually passes away.

The denial of a permanent and self-sufficient entity differs from the use of a term like “oneself”. This can be clarified with contemplation of the four elements. We know from quantum physics that matter is ultimately just energy processes interacting with one another in a large amount of space. There is nothing substantial or permanent. Everything is just a constant flow and flux under the influence of causes and conditions. Yet this does not mean that we can just walk through a wall. The wall is definitely there right in front of us and, no matter how thoroughly we have studied quantum physics, if we try to walk through it, we will bang our head.

The teaching on emptiness or not-self is similar. It certainly does not deny the subjective sense of continuity or the influence of karma. The point is only that such continuity is not due to some solid, unchanging, and substantial core within ourselves. Instead, it is due to a process of causes and conditions. The other side of the coin of emptiness is conditionality. In other words, the apparent void of emptiness is filled by causes and conditions.

This in turn relates to the fact that there is no mono-causality to be found anywhere. Whatever there is, it results from an interplay of a range of causes and conditions. Some of these causes and conditions fall within the sphere of our influence. Others operate outside of it. We can influence things, but we are not in full control.

Staying just within the confines of a single life, it should be obvious that what we have done in the past influences what we are at present. What we learned at school and later is what enables us now to perform the tasks in which we are engaged. The earlier learning is our “karmic deed” and our present abilities are its “karmic fruit”.

As a general pattern, selfishness and cruelty lead to suffering, just as kindness and generosity lead to happiness. Results do not invariably

manifest right on the spot, just as a single day of learning at school does not immediately result in getting a job. In effect not everything learned at school will be of future use. Nevertheless, there is a general tendency for learning and study to lead to better employment. Again, not every act of selfishness and cruelty will immediately issue in suffering, and not every instance of kindness and generosity yields instant happiness. Still there is a general tendency for selfishness and cruelty to have negative results for ourselves and others, just as kindness and generosity tend to have positive results. None of this conflicts with the teaching on not-self or emptiness, just as quantum physics does not conflict with the experience of the solidity of walls.

Not only is there no conflict, but the teaching on emptiness even has a direct relevance to the contrast between cruelty and kindness. Cruelty and a whole range of unwholesome reactions have their foundation in selfishness. To the degree to which insight into emptiness is able to deconstruct selfishness, to that degree mental space opens up for the growth of kindness and other wholesome mental attitudes. Just as conditionality is the other side of the coin of emptiness from a functional perspective, so from an affective perspective the *brahmavihāras* are the natural flourishing that emerges once a diminishing of egoism has been brought about through insight into emptiness.

This in turn goes to show that emptiness does not make us dysfunctional. On the contrary, to the extent to which we are able to let go of the burden of ego and self-reference, to that extent we become more functional and better at doing what we have to do. In this way, cultivating insight into emptiness is quite different from a tendency to dissociate and become disconnected. It is the precise opposite of that. Just as equanimity is poles apart from indifference, similarly genuine insight into emptiness is far away from escapism.

Due to the emphasis given throughout the practice to an embodied form of mindfulness as the central reference point, helpful groundwork has been established to counter any tendency to dissociation. If such a tendency should manifest, then this calls for increased emphasis on embodied presence of the mind. This will ensure that the type of emptiness cultivated is a genuine one, which will manifest through the natural flourishing of the *brahmavihāras*.

During actual contemplation of the elements, the fact of conditionality can be practically explored in terms of the dependence of our own body on the elements outside. This body is entirely dependent on an adequate supply of the four elements from outside. It can survive without receiving supplies of the earth element in the form of food for a few months at most. Our body can survive without being supplied with the water element in the form of beverages for just some days. It can survive being deprived of the fire element in the form of warmth, such as when naked outside in cold winter, only for hours. It can survive without supply of the wind element in the form of oxygen merely for minutes. Our body is entirely dependent on these four elements. Out of these four, the one element we most pressingly need is at the same time the most ephemeral of the four: the wind element in the form of the motion of air going in and out. This dependency reveals the precariousness of our physical existence.

Such precariousness is not something that affects only ourselves. It is a predicament we share with all other living beings. In this way a realization of emptiness and conditionality is naturally accompanied by an opening of the heart to compassion.

THE ELEMENTS AND MENTAL BALANCE

A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* relates the elements to the mental balance of a fully awakened one (AN 9.11; Anālayo 2013: 94f). The arahant Sāriputta had been falsely accused by another monastic. In order to clear up the false allegation, Sāriputta described his mental attitude, thereby implicitly assuring others that he was incapable of doing what he had been accused of. This description compares his mental attitude to the earth. Just as the earth does not react with disgust when something dirty is thrown on it, so too the mind of an arahant cannot react with anger and aversion. Again, water does not react if something dirty is thrown into it. Fire does not react when something disgusting is burned in it. Wind does not react to the repulsiveness of things on which it blows. Whatever happens, the elements do not take it personally. In the same way, the mind of an arahant is free from aversion and irritation; it does not take things personally.

This episode invites us to use the natural manifestations of the elements outside in nature as an exemplification of stability of the mind within. In this way, recollecting the elements can be used as an

inspiration to cultivate the absence of reactivity that is characteristic of those who have walked the path all the way to its completion.

A similar perspective emerges from the *Mahārāhulovādasutta* (MN 62; Anālayo 2003: 152). The instructions given in this discourse begin by describing the elements, with the element earth and the element water covering the same anatomical parts that are also listed in the exercise taken up in the previous chapter. The two elements of fire and wind find exemplification in various manifestations of heat and motion respectively. In addition to these four elements, the discourse also brings in the element of space. In each case the task is to proceed from a recognition of the internal manifestations of any element to an awareness of its external manifestations outside in nature. In order to cultivate dispassion with each element, the final instruction is invariably that the element should be contemplated as not being me or mine.

The discourse goes on to describe a mode of meditation that resembles the attitude of the arahant Sāriputta in the passage mentioned earlier. The recommendation is to cultivate a state of mind like the earth, which does not react with disgust when something dirty is thrown on it. As we practise in this way, the dichotomy of pleasure and pain will no longer be able to overwhelm the mind. The instructions continue for the elements of water, fire, and wind in the same manner. In each case a state of mind should be cultivated that resembles the respective element, as a result of which pleasure and pain will no longer overwhelm the mind.

The element earth can also be used to exemplify our rootedness in what is wholesome and productive of welfare for ourselves and others. Again, similar to water, which adapts its form to wherever it flows, so we can train ourselves to be flexible and adaptive to outer circumstances. Just as fire provides warmth to those who are shivering with cold, so we can offer the warmth of our heart to the lonely and desolate. Comparable to wind that keeps moving, in the same way we keep progressing on the path to liberation. In this or any other way, the four elements can be employed as metaphors for mental qualities to be cultivated.

THE ELEMENT SPACE

Lastly in the *Mahārāhulovāda-sutta* comes the element space. Here it is

no longer a question of not reacting to dirty and disgusting things. Instead, the instruction is to develop a mind like space, which is not established anywhere.

The perception of space cultivated in this manner in a way sums up the understanding of emptiness that can be developed with the help of the elements. As mentioned earlier, matter is for the most part just space. Space is always there, in any situation. It just takes a moment of paying attention to notice it. This can be particularly helpful when confronted with strong reactions by others. Whatever dirt may be thrown at us, just a moment of attention given to the space between ourselves and the other(s), and from that to the space all around us, can help to maintain balance of the mind (Anālayo 2017c: 196). Attending to space allows the mind to become spacious and keeps it from contracting and becoming narrow and confined. In a way space simply leaves no solid landing place for the reactions of others or our own reactivity to that. In terms of the challenge posed by the hindrances and other problems, rather than leading to a time- and energy-consuming need to engage in battle, these can just be allowed to dissolve. From the vantage point of that mental space, we are so much better able to deal efficiently with whatever problem has manifested.

Cultivating the perception of space can also be undertaken supported by gradually proceeding through the four elements in the sequence in which they are described in the discourse. On following the mode of contemplation described above, the shift from the earth element to the water element in this body can be accompanied by the recognition that it is because of cohesion that this body does not just crumble to dust. Without the principle of cohesion, the apparently so solid floor on which we sit would be like quicksand. In other words, the earth element depends on the water element; it cannot exist without it. The very quality of solidity depends on the quality of cohesion.

In the case of the transition from water to fire, a similar reflection can be undertaken. For water to perform its cohesive function, it has to be at the right temperature. If it is too cold, water freezes and becomes brittle; if it is too warm, it evaporates. For water to perform its cohesive function in a living body, it is crucial that this body be kept

within the appropriate temperature range. Unless this temperature range is maintained, the body will pass away and fall apart. Without the appropriate temperature, the quality of cohesion will not be able to perform its function. In this way the water element in this body depends on the fire element.

Regarding the transition from fire to wind, temperature is simply a result of motion. Without motion, there would not be any manifestation of fire. Motion in turn depends on space. Without space, motion could hardly take place. In this way the four elements can be contemplated as depending on one another in such a way that this leads up to the perception of space.

This mode of practice helps to diminish clinging rapidly. The insubstantial nature of the body becomes a palpable, personal, and direct experience, and the findings of quantum physics, which at first sight might seem far removed from our subjective experience of the body, make increasingly more sense.

OPEN PRACTICE

After having explored the elements through the four scans, we move on to just being aware of the body in the sitting posture as made up of earth, water, fire, and wind. Building on the gradual diminishing of identification with the body, we are ready to open up to being aware of the empty nature of the present moment in whatever way it unfolds. We move on to an undirected mode of practice. Mindfulness remains firmly rooted in the body and we stay widely open to whatever manifests with any of the senses, experienced as changing phenomena. The resultant practice is somewhat like looking at flowing water in a creek or stream. Due to the swift flow of the water, we are not really able to discern minor details. What stands out prominently in our vision is instead the constant flow.

In the case of shorter distractions, comparable to meeting someone on the road and just exchanging greetings, we simply come back to being with our good friend *sati*. In the case of longer distractions, similar to meeting someone on the road and sitting down to have a longer conversation, we can again take up the contemplation of the elements. Before doing that, for a moment we discern the empty nature of whatever thought, memory, or fantasy has caused the distraction. The body made up of the four elements is empty just as

the mind caught up in some distraction is empty.

The previous exercise of contemplating the body's anatomy has already imbued our practice with a sense of non-attachment. Building on that, the present exercise instils in us a sense of freedom from identification, from holding on to this body as mine.

In terms of the simile of the wheel that illustrates this approach to *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, contemplation of the elements continues a task already begun by contemplation of the anatomical parts, which is rooting mindfulness firmly in the body. With contemplation of the elements the process of breathing receives additional attention as part of awareness of the whole of the body. This serves to strengthen further the type of rootedness in whole-body awareness that forms the hub of the wheel of practice. Attending to the process of breathing as an integral part of whole-body awareness offers a convenient reference point for not getting lost and succumbing to distractions when shifting to open awareness. The contribution made by contemplation of the elements to the outer rim is a gradual lessening of identification with the body. This comes together with an increasing appreciation of our connectedness to others and the environment, which in turn naturally gives rise to compassion.

SUMMARY

The four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind represent qualities. These can be experienced with body scans, discerning the presence of solidity, cohesion/wetness, temperature, and motion inside of our body. The main thrust of this contemplation is to gain insight into the empty nature of the body and its intrinsic interrelation with matter outside of it. Such insight into the empty nature of all aspects of material existence can serve as a foundation for an opening of the heart and the establishment of inner balance in the face of any challenge.