

I have spent most of my adult life living in a city, having a job and practicing Dharma. In the city, I am faced with a very different landscape from what the Buddha saw in his life: pavement and sidewalks, fire hydrants, buses, traffic signals and neon signs. I regularly go on retreat to beautiful natural areas, but I also try to bring the practices of transformation into my daily urban life.

At the beginning of the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha makes this inspiring declaration: “This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of liberation.” He goes on to describe a myriad of ways to practice that will put us on this path, many of which apply mindfulness to the direct experience of our own physical body, “contemplating the body as a body.” I particularly like the practice of the “four elements”—reflecting on the body as composed of air, water, fire and earth—and exploring its relevance for us today in an urban environment. The direct experience of the human body seems to remain the same after thousands of years despite technological innovations and new geographic boundaries.



Let's start with the **air element**. Many people use this as their base object of awareness in sitting meditation: the movement of the breath as it enters and leaves the body. The simple act of breathing, something we have been doing since the moment of our birth and which we will continue doing until our death, is the continuous syncopation of our lives. The air element sustains us, and we share the air that we breathe with everyone, whatever their age, ethnicity, occupation, bank account or species. We share it with all other expressions of urban life—the dogs, cats, pigeons, mice and insects and, fortunately, also with the plants, who are quietly respiring in exchange with us, breathing in CO₂ and breathing out oxygen.

You can connect directly with the experience of the air element at any time. Bring your attention to your chest expanding and contracting as you breathe. See others breathing by paying attention to those waiting with you at the bus stop, to the dog lying on the sidewalk, to the baby rolling by in a stroller. Observe flags wafting in the breeze and plastic bags being blown around in circles in alleys. Notice a vehicle belching clouds of smog, impacting the air element for all of us. Sense the air element as movement, internally and externally.



Next is the **water element**. We can't live very long without the water element. Like the surface of the Earth itself, the human body is made up of about seventy percent water. We are like walking bags of liquid held together by our skin. We are constantly replenishing the liquid in our bodies like giant water filters, with more liquid poured in and then excreted through sweat, urine and tears. Water is carried through our bodies in systems of arteries, veins and other vessels just as, beneath our feet on the sidewalk, elaborate systems of pipes bring water to buildings for us to drink and wash with, while others remove sewage and waste.

Our individual bodies periodically interact with these larger systems.

Feel the liquid nature of your own body—the saliva in your mouth, the lubrication of your eyeballs, the gurgling in your belly. Feel the softness of your arms, legs and torso; this is due to the liquidity and cohesion of the water element in your body. As you turn on a faucet to get a drink, flush the toilet, or pass a gushing fire hydrant, sense the water element, internally and externally.



The **fire element** represents the heat or coolness we feel in our body. As delicate organisms, we can only survive within a limited range of temperature. The fire element burns up food in digestion—and slowly ages us. Our life is like a bonfire, consuming all the fuel we pile on it. (And none of us knows how long our fire will burn.) Our skin goes from fresh and unwrinkled as babies to drier and more shriveled as we age, just as the paint on buildings crackles and peels in the sun. The fire element is present in the heat and energy from

TEXT ANUSHKA FERNANDOPULLE

URBAN ELEMENTS

ARTWORK ANNA ONEGLIA

neon signs and traffic lights, as well as in the furnaces and space heaters we use to keep ourselves warm.

Drop into your body with an awareness of temperature and feel that different parts of the body have different levels of heat and coolness. Notice how these levels are constantly shifting, like the temperature of the air outside as the Earth rotates and tilts through the seasons during the year. Pay attention to the fire element in the vast system of electrical wires running above our streets that connect to the wiring in our homes and offices. In the glow of your computer screen and the warmth of your hands typing, feel the fire element, internally and externally.



Finally, the **earth element** represents solidity—hardness or softness, roughness or smoothness. The Earth always supports us, regardless of what we have done or how hard our day may have been. We can feel the solidity of our bones and teeth and the pressure of our body on the ground as we sit or stand. The earth element is apparent all over the city—in the concrete of the roads, the bricks of the buildings, the metals of the vehicles. Notice the solidity of the earth element reflected in the architectural structure of buildings, just as it is in the skeletal scaffolding of your body. Remember the earth element, internally and externally.

The food that sustains us is made up of all four elements. Vegetables and grains were grown in the earth, watered by the rain, and nourished by the light of the sun and warmth of the air. In the city, it often seems like food comes from store shelves, vending machines and foil or plastic packages. But when you reflect a little more deeply, you can remember that it is the four elements that nourish our life through each meal we eat, even if it comes in a takeout container.

Contemplation of the four elements calls into question the boundary between “me” and “not me.” Where is the boundary between me and the air I breathe? The water I drink? The minerals in the vitamins I swallow? The waste that comes from my body and returns to the Earth? At what point does the sandwich I eat end and my body begin? Boundaries are not as clear as they seem.

Relaxing into this truth can bring tremendous freedom, confidence and joy. We are part of our environment, whether hiking through the woods or strolling down a busy street. Our bodies are made of the same elements that we see around us and are affected by the health and vitality of these elements. We are earth, air, fire and water; we are concrete, wind currents, electricity and hydrants. As the Buddha said, “This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of liberation.” Enjoy your urban contemplation. ~

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Anushka Fernandopulle works as a management consultant, career/life coach and Dharma teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. Visit www.myspace.com/anushkaf for more information.