

Sebene Selassie

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

Week One: "Earth: Grounding Our Practice"

March 1, 2020



Hi there. My name is Sebene Selassie. I am a Dharma teacher and a writer, and I want to welcome you to Tricycle's Meditation Month video series "Mindfulness of the Four Elements." I'll be leading this four-week series where we'll be exploring these four elements of earth, water, fire, and air. This is a classical practice that can help us connect to nature within and around us.

Before we get started with the elements, I'd like to tell you about myself and how I became connected to these teachings. I began studying Buddhism 30 years ago as an undergraduate at McGill University, where I majored in comparative religious studies. My focus was Buddhism, but I actually read more about the buddhadharma than I practiced it. I had a lot of books about Buddhism, but I didn't meditate very much. It wasn't until my mid-20s when I started practicing in earnest. I met a Zen teacher here in New York City and began practicing with him and that community, and what I noticed—like maybe a lot of us when we first come to practice—was a lot of suffering. Suffering brought me to the cushion. I was experiencing a lot of distress and unhappiness. I was in my mid-20s and had a lot of romantic drama. I was what you technically call "a hot mess." And when I sat down, I found that my mind was all over the place. I was living in a virtual reality of projections, memories, fantasies, and I was upset a lot of the time.

The practice helped me connect to what I was disconnected from: my body, my emotions, and my moment-to-moment experience. So I continued to practice in the Zen tradition for a few years. Then about 20 years ago, I traveled in Southeast Asia, practiced and studied in Thailand, and became re-familiarized with Theravada Buddhism, the early Buddhism that's found in Southeast Asia—in Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Laos, and Cambodia. I've been studying in that tradition since, and have been connected to the insight meditation community for the past 15 years; that's where I now teach.

I found the elements practice in the Pali canon, which is Theravada Buddhism's collection of scriptures, and is written in Pali, an early Buddhist language. These teachings on the elements are found in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the foundational discourse on mindfulness, which is a part of the Pali canon. When I was first introduced to them, I resonated with their power for connecting us to the body. Like I mentioned, I felt pretty disembodied, and I think that's a condition for a lot of us as moderns, as Westerners. I'm interested in helping us reconnect to our bodies. We tend to

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privilege the rational mind, the intellect, and that's reinforced by the culture around us. So a lot of my teaching centers on how we can connect to the body—how we can re-ground—and I think the elements is perfect for this.

Today, we're going to explore this first element of earth, which is all about grounding. I like to begin every teaching with grounding in wherever I am. So today, I'm joining you from New York Insight Meditation Center, one of my dharma homes, in lower Manhattan, in New York City. This is the indigenous land of the Lenape peoples, who stewarded this land for thousands of years before colonization. "Manhattan" itself is a Lenape word. It's been translated as "the place where we get bows," or, more specifically, "the place for gathering the wood to make bows." According to tradition, Manhattan was named for a grove of hickory trees at the lower end of the island that was thought to be especially good wood for making bows. So we often associate this city with concrete and skyscrapers, but I love how this acknowledgement of indigenous land, of grounding in the place where we are, can also connect us to the original nature of a place. When we honor native land and connect to the earth of a place, we have an opportunity to learn from the original culture, original languages, and traditions of wherever we are.

I also like to ground in these teachings and recognize that they have been carried as a lineage for thousands of years by Asian ancestors, by Asian communities and cultures. But Asian people, including Asian-American heritage Buddhists, were persecuted and discriminated against for their connection to these teachings. By recognizing my privilege in being able to be here and share these teachings with you, I can ground in both the land acknowledgement of the indigenous people as well as an acknowledgment of the indigenous teachings. As you practice over these four weeks with the elements, I invite you to consider what helps you ground and connect to wherever you are and whatever you're practicing.

We can think of these four elements as basic categories. They're metaphors for our lived experience. Like all language, they are metaphors. Earth refers to whatever is solid. Water refers to whatever is fluid and flowing. Fire refers to temperature, whether hot or cold. And air refers to all that is moving and ephemeral. For our contemporary minds, these categories might seem simplistic—to think of everything in the world in just four categories when we have over one

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hundred categories of elements of the Periodic table, for example. When we have hundreds and thousands of designations and specifications for different objects, beings, places, people, and things, four seems like not enough. But there's a real poetry in the simplification of our experience into something like four elements, and we find that the elements—whether four, five, or six—exist as metaphors or poetry for experience across all ancient traditions. We find it from ancient Egypt to ancient Greece, to India and China, to Persia, and in the indigenous traditions of Africa and the Americas. In the classical Buddhist mindfulness teachings, these four elements are categories for understanding our experience that are given as objects for mindfulness in the same way that the breath, body, mind, or thoughts is given as an object. In my own experience I found that practicing with these four simple elements can lead to profound understanding of my own experience and my relationship, both internally and externally.

As I mentioned, these teachings are found in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. *Sati* is a Pali word that we often translate as "mindfulness," which is not really a great translation, because we put the word "mind" right at the beginning of it. But *sati* is inviting us into a holistic and embodied awareness of our experience.

I like one of the etymological connotations of *sati*, which is "to remember." I think of that as remembering our present moment, but also re-membering, like bringing the parts of ourselves back together again. When we think of *sati* in that way, the elements are a beautiful poetry for awakening to our everyday experience.

If you're caught in your head, like me, often thinking and off in thought, the elements can help you to reconnect to your body. We remember to ground in the earth of the body. We remember to feel the fluidity of the body. We remember to experience the fluctuations of temperature in the body through fire. Or we remember to experience the movement of air.

This practice helps us connect to nature by connecting us to our own nature, because we are nature, too. We often think of nature as somewhere out there, upstate, or at the ocean, in the countryside. We forget that we are part of this living, dynamic process of nature and a small part of it at that. Ultimately, these teachings help us loosen our clinging to any sense of small

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self-identification with these bodies as something special or unique—separate from the rest of reality. So today, we'll explore this earth element and practice mindfulness of earth element.

Like I said, the earth element is everything solid in the body, everything that is dense and stable. Our bones, our flesh, our muscle, the sense of our density here right now—that is the earth element. I appreciate how these elements are ordered in the teachings in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, because earth allows us to ground and to establish a sense of stability, which, again, we often need, especially as moderns. We're so lost in our virtual reality of thought and thinking; in our technology; and our virtual communication. So reconnecting to the body, grounding in *right here, right now*, is a great place to start.

Connecting to the earth element also helps us realize that we're made of the same matter as everything else. This simple metaphor refers to the density of matter. All of the matter in the universe originated from one pinpoint. Actually, a *tiny* pinpoint—one trillionth the size of the period that ends a sentence. All matter originated from the same space and place, from almost nothing, and it became differentiated since then. This is not to deny that things are different from one another, but the metaphor of connecting to densely packed matter as the earth element allows us to recognize that original point of connection that we still live within. Thanks to gravity, we can always feel the density of the earth element.

To me, the earth element is probably the easiest element to experience. All we need to do is feel the contact with what's underneath us, the floor or the ground, and with that contact we feel the earth element. You can also take a look around you and notice what is solid, or seemingly solid in your world. The floor, the walls, the brick, the mountains, the trees; these are all earth element too. You can consider the food that you eat, and eliminate, and sustains you. earth sustains earth. All that you experience inside of you that is solid, all that you experience outside of you that is solid, that is dense, that has this material solidity to it—that is the earth element. It's simple to understand it in that way.

I'd like to practice a bit with the earth element as a meditation. I invite you to take a posture that feels comfortable for you, whether that sitting, standing, or lying down. I invite you to close your

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eyes, if that feels comfortable, or to just gaze at the floor or something in front of you. Let's begin by spending a few moments in silence settling into this particular moment, without needing to do anything.

Allow the body to just relax, soften, and settle in. You may notice what's happening right now, perhaps sounds or sensations, thoughts or emotions. You don't need to grasp or reject anything.

I'm going to invite you to begin to connect to the earth element. To do this you might feel the weight or density of the body, perhaps feeling the contact with the floor underneath you, feeling your butt in the seat or your feet on the ground.

Can you feel the density of the body? Can you feel the weight of the body? Can you sense the bones in your body? Your skull. Your teeth. Your spine. Your limbs.

Do you sense the flesh and muscles on these bones? Sense their weight or heft. All that is solid and dense in the body—this is the earth element in you.

Allow yourself to continue to connect to this earth element. Allow yourself to connect to this felt sense of the earth element. this practice to ground you.

Feel the stability of the earth element and know that you can feel rooted like a tree, stable like a mountain.

<Bell chimes>

Now, connecting back to our time together here, I wonder how that was for you. I hope that it's helpful to connect to this earth element as a way to ground, connect to the body, and have more of this embodied awareness that these teachings are inviting us into. If it was challenging for you, just remember it's a practice and it's called *practice* for a reason. Sometimes we need to try something out a few times before we can feel it in our bones. No pun intended.

I often use mindfulness of earth when I'm feeling particularly scattered, lost, or caught in thought. When I'm lost in the busyness of my life, I can connect with the ground underneath my

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feet, connect with my seat, and feel the stability of the earth element. That grounding can be helpful in the busyness of our lives.

This week I invite you to make this element and practice yours. See where and how you can connect to the earth element, whether it's in a formal practice of practicing with mindfulness of earth as a meditation, or whether it's connecting to the earth element around you. Wherever you're sitting, standing, or eating—when you're in contact with the solidity of the world—can you remember? Can you have that *sati*, mindfulness, or remembering of this earth element?

You could also look up the *Satipatthana Sutta* and explore the classical instructions. In the coming weeks we'll look at those instructions more thoroughly and explore what they have to teach us about practicing with mindfulness of the elements.

In the next session, we'll be exploring the elements of water—all that is fluid and flowing in our lives. We'll also be exploring a part of the sutta that talks about contemplating these elements internally, externally, and both internally and externally.

I hope you got benefit from this practice today and I look forward to seeing you next time. Thank you.