



# Four Element Meditation

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## Abstract

One of the mindfulness exercises described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels concerns the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, which stand representative of the qualities of solidity, cohesion, temperature, and motion. Within the ancient Indian setting, the early Buddhist analysis of matter into these four elements can be seen to eschew the two extremes of materialist annihilationism and eternalism; closer inspection also shows that the employment of these elements does not reflect the influence of Brahminical cosmology, as assumed by Alexander Wynne. The ultimate concern of mindful contemplation of the elements is their transcendence, which is to be achieved through cultivating liberating insight into their impermanent and empty nature.

**Keywords** Contemplation of the body · Four elements · Materialism · Not self · *satipaṭṭhāna*

Ancient Indian thought conceived of matter as made up of the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. A comparable approach can also be found in preSocratic Greece, as Empedocles is known for having developed such a scheme (Wright 1997, pp. 178–184). This model laid an important foundation for the development of natural sciences in the West. A specific early Buddhist contribution to the four-element scheme lies in relating it to mindfulness meditation by way of an analytical approach to the subjective dimension of experience.

## Instructions for Mindfulness of the Elements

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels, instructions on how to relate mindfulness to the four elements form part of the description of contemplation of the body, the first of the four establishments of mindfulness. The relevant instructions proceed as follows:

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

(MN 10: *imam eva kāyaṃ yathāthitaṃ yathāpanihitaṃ dhātuso paccavekkhati: atthi imasmiṃ kāye paṭhavīdhātu āpodhātu tejodhātu vāyodhātū ti*).

One contemplates the body’s elements: “Within this body of mine there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, the wind element, the space element, and the consciousness element.”

(MĀ 98: 觀身諸界: 我此身中有地界, 水界, 火界, 風界, 空界, 識界).

One contemplates [reflecting]: “Are there in this body the earth element, the water [element], the fire [element], and the wind element?”

(EĀ 12.1: 觀此身有地種耶, 水, 火, 風種耶).

A significant difference occurs in the second of these three versions, stemming from the *Madhyama-āgama*, which in addition to the four elements mentions space and consciousness. The last is clearly a misfit in the present context (Anālayo 2013b), which is concerned with contemplation of the body as distinct from the third establishment of mindfulness, contemplation of the mind. In such a setting, the listing of four elements as an analysis of matter is quite appropriate. The same would also apply to space. The listing of the whole set of six elements, however, found regularly elsewhere among the early discourses, covers the mind in addition to matter and thus goes beyond contemplation of the body. An expansion of a reference to four elements could easily have happened during oral transmission of the discourses (Anālayo 2020), resulting in the addition of space and consciousness.

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A minor difference is that the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, the first version translated above, explicitly indicates that such practice can be done however the body is placed or disposed. This gives the impression that the exercise is not confined to formal sitting meditation. Another minor difference occurs in the last of the three versions, stemming from the *Ekottarika-āgama*, which formulates the contemplation as a question. This conveys a sense of inquiry or investigation to the exercise.

The actual modality of apperception of the elements is not further specified in any of the three parallel versions. Its practical implementation could take the form of attempting to sense the qualities represented by the four elements in one's body, by way of noting solidity, cohesion, temperature, and motion. Alternatively, the practice could also be intending a more reflective type of contemplation.

## The Implications of the Four Elements

The implications that the scheme of four elements carried in early Buddhist thought can be conveniently explored with the help of the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. The two versions feature the Buddha's chief disciple Sāriputta as their main speaker, who presents an analytical investigation of the perhaps most central of the early Buddhist teachings: the four noble truths. This investigation turns to the first truth, then to another key teaching mentioned in this first truth, the five aggregates of clinging, followed by taking up the first of these five, the aggregate of form. This is made up of the four elements.

Having in this way led their investigation from the four noble truths as the overarching theme to an examination of the physical constitution of the body, the parallels devote considerable space to exploring each of the four elements, taking them up from the viewpoint of their internal and external manifestations. Internal manifestations of the earth element are solid anatomical parts found in the body, such as hair, nails, teeth, bones, etc. The internal water element in turn refers to bodily liquids, the fire element to bodily warmth, and the wind element to motions inside of the body. Each of these internal manifestations of an element has its external counterpart in the corresponding element found outside of the body.

The two parallels draw attention to the impermanent nature of these external counterparts, noting that even the whole earth will eventually meet with destruction. Such testimony to the ultimately impermanent nature of the elements should in turn be applied to their internal manifestation, which are obviously of the same nature. Hence, the proper attitude is to contemplate each of the elements as bereft of a self:

It should be viewed with right wisdom as it really is in this way: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”

(MN 28: *taṃ n' etaṃ mama, n' eso 'ham asmi, na meso attā ti, evaṃ etaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabbaṃ*).

A learned noble disciple does not have this thought: “This is me, this is mine, I belong to it.” How could one have such a thought?

(MĀ 30: 多聞聖弟子不作此念: 是我, 是我所, 我是彼所. 彼云何作是念?).

The thrust toward insight into not self, evident in this way, is similarly relevant to the mindfulness exercise concerned with the four elements.

## The Four Elements as Qualities

Another aspect of the presentation in the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel requires further examination, which is their identification of solid bodily parts as manifestations of the earth element and of bodily liquids as manifestations of the water element. This could easily give the impression that bones, for example, are simply being equated with the earth element.

Proceeding to another reference to the four elements, however, can serve to correct this impression. This reference occurs in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* and its parallels extant in Chinese and Tibetan. The relevant passage, being again a teaching attributed to Sāriputta, describes how an accomplished meditator may contemplate a log of wood from a variety of perspectives, including each of the four elements. That is, although the log of wood can be viewed as a manifestation of the earth element, it can similarly be viewed as a manifestation of the water element, of the fire element, or of the wind element. The reason is that each of these elements is found in the log of wood:

Friends, in this log of wood there is the earth element ... the water element ... the fire element ... the wind element.

(AN 6.41: *atthi, āvuso, amusmiṃ dārukkaṇḍhe paṭhavīdhātu ... āpodhātu ... tejodhātu ... vāyodhātu*; the latter part of the quote is abbreviated in the original).

In this withered tree there is the earth element ... the water [element] ... the fire [element] ... the wind [element].

(SĀ 494: 此枯樹中有地界 ... 水 ... 火 ... 風).

In this log of wood there is the earth element ... the water [element], the fire [element], and the wind [element].

(Up 2020: *shing gi phung po 'di la sa'i kham yod de ... chu dang me dang rlu dang*).

This in turn suggests that the presentation in the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel need not be taken to intend a wholesale equation of solid bodily parts with the earth element, for example. Once the other three elements are found in a block of wood, they would also be found in solid bodily parts like the bones. In other words, the bones are mentioned as a manifestation of the earth element because this is predominant in them. For this reason, they can serve to exemplify its quality. But the same bones must also consist, at least to some degree, of the other three elements. Besides being solid (= earth), within bones there is indeed some degree of cohesion (= water), they have a temperature (= fire), and there is motion (= wind) in them, at least at a very subtle level.

## The Four Elements and Mental Attitudes

In the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, the cultivation of insight into emptiness in terms of the absence of a self, based on the four elements, has quite practical ramifications. Both versions describe how such insight can provide the inner strength to face with mental steadiness situations of being abused and even being physically attacked.

A relationship between the four elements and mental attitudes emerges also in an instruction given by the Buddha to his son Rāhula, recorded in the *Mahārāhulovāda-sutta* (MN 62). The instruction recommends an attitude of inner balance comparable with the elements, which do not react with disgust or aversion when something dirty is dropped on or into them. Although such an instruction is not found in a parallel to this discourse, extant in the *Ekottarika-āgama* (EĀ 17.1), this absence could be due to a transmission problem (Anālayo 2014/2015).

An implementation of such inner balance, comparable with the elements, can be seen in another discourse, found in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, and in its parallels. This is yet another instance involving Sāriputta who, according to the narrative setting, had just been falsely accused of having slighted another monastic. In reply to this allegation, in front of the Buddha he clarified his own mental attitude in ways closely similar to the instruction to Rāhula, indicating that his mind is similar to the earth, which does not react with negativity when something dirty is dropped on it:

Venerable sir, it is just as when they drop what is clean on the earth and they drop what is unclean on it: they drop feces on it, they drop urine on it, they drop spittle

on it, they drop pus on it, and they drop blood on it. Yet, the earth is not repelled, humiliated, or disgusted by it. (AN 9.11: *seyyathā pi, bhante, paṭhaviyaṃ sucim pi nikkhipanti asucim pi nikkhipanti gūthagatam pi nikkhipanti muttagatam pi nikkhipanti khelāgatam pi nikkhipanti pubbagatam pi nikkhipanti lohitaḡatam pi nikkhipanti, na ca tena paṭhavī aṭṭiyati vā harāyati vā jigucchati vā*).

It is just as the earth receives all, what is clean together with what is unclean: excrement, urine, snot, and spittle. Yet, the earth does not for this reason have hate and craving; it is not embarrassed, not ashamed, and also not humiliated.

(MĀ 24: 猶若如地, 淨與不淨, 大便, 小便, 涕, 唾悉受, 地不以此而有憎愛, 不羞, 不慙, 亦不愧恥).

Just as this earth receives what is clean and also receives what is unclean: excrement, urine, filth, pus, blood, tears, spittle, all of which it receives without opposition, indeed this earth speaks neither bad words nor good words.

(EĀ 37.6: 如此地亦受淨, 亦受不淨, 屎, 尿, 穢惡, 皆悉受之, 膿, 血, 涕, 唾, 終不逆之, 然此地亦不言惡, 亦不言善,).

The same holds for the other three elements. In this way, the inability of the elements to react or speak words serves as an illustration to inculcate the appropriate mental attitude. The idea appears to be that, after all, what is there is just a combination of the four elements. Just as these are unable to react with negativity, similarly the mind of an accomplished practitioner like Sāriputta is unable to do what he had been falsely accused of. The depiction of such an attitude can be taken to point to the same insight already evident in the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, namely insight into emptiness or not self.

## The Butcher Simile

The relevance of such insight to mindful contemplation of the elements can be further explored with the help of a simile that in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels accompanies the instructions translated above:

Monastics, 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.

(MN 10: *seyyathā pi, bhikkhave, dakkho goghātako vā goghātakantevāsī vā gāviṃ vadhitvā cātummahāpathe bilaso paṭivibhajitvā nisinno assa*).

It is just as a butcher who, on having slaughtered and skinned a cow, divides it into six parts and spreads them on the ground [for sale].

(MĀ 98: 猶如屠兒殺牛，剝皮布於地上，分作六段).

It is just like a capable cow butcher or the apprentice of a cow butcher who divides a cow [into pieces by cutting through] its tendons. While dividing it, they contemplate and see for themselves that “these are the feet,” “this is the heart,” “these are the tendons,” and “this is the head.” (EĀ 12.1: 猶如巧能屠牛之士，若屠牛弟子，解牛節，解而自觀見：此是脚，此是心，是節，此是頭).

The version of this simile in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, the first version translated above, is somewhat terse. The implications of being seated at a crossroads can conveniently be fleshed out with the next version, from the *Madhyama-āgama*, which clarifies that the purpose is to offer the meat for sale. On a side note, in line with its expansion from four to six elements, this discourse speaks of dividing the cow into six parts.

The *Ekottarika-āgama* version offers additional details, indicating that the simile points to a shift of perception. At the time of being about to slaughter the animal, the butcher will still have the perception “this is a cow.” Once the cow is dead and skinned, however, while cutting up its parts for sale, the butcher will instead begin to perceive these as disconnected parts. The Pāli commentary’s gloss on the butcher simile reflects a similar understanding:

The perception “cow” does not disappear in [the butcher] as long as he has not cut it up into pieces. Being seated and having cut it up, the perception “cow” disappears and the perception of “meat” comes to be. It does not occur to him: “I am selling a cow and the [buyers] are taking a cow along.” Instead, it occurs to him: “I am selling meat and the [buyers] are taking meat along.” (Ps I 271: *tāvad eva gāvī ti saññā na antaradhāyati, yāva naṃ padāletvā bīlaso na vibhajati. vibhajitvā nisinnassa pana gāvī ti saññā antaradhāyati, maṃsasaññā pavattati, nāssa evaṃ hoti: ahaṃ gāvīṃ vikkiṇāmi, ime gāvīṃ harantī ti. atha khv’ assa: ahaṃ maṃsaṃ vikkiṇāmi, ime maṃsaṃ haranti icc’ eva hoti*).

In the same way, the meditator should learn to butcher the compact sense of a self by cutting its material manifestation up into the four elements.

## The Elements and Materialism

Although materialism was one of the various philosophical positions taken by ancient Indians (see, e.g., Bronkhorst 2016;

Chattopadhyaya 1959; Ruben 1935), the butcher simile does not imply that contemplation of the four elements was meant to encourage a reduction of human bodily existence to its material dimension only. In fact, as already mentioned in relation to the instructions in the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, in early Buddhist thought the scheme of the four elements does not function as an exhaustive account of individual existence, for which purpose space and consciousness would need to be added. The last of these is certainly not considered to be a mere byproduct of material processes.

The early Buddhists’ acquaintance with a materialist position, based on the four elements, can be seen in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* and its parallels. The narrative setting takes the form of a king’s report of his previous encounters with various nonBuddhist teachers. The parallel versions disagree regarding which of these teachers held which view or combination of views (Bapat 1948; MacQueen 1988; Meisig 1987). The case of materialism, based on the four elements, finds expression in the relevant discourse versions in the following manner:

This human being is made up of the four elements. When it dies, the earth [element] reverts to and returns to the aggregate of earth, the water [element] reverts to and returns to the aggregate of water, the fire [element] reverts to and returns to the aggregate of fire, the wind [element] reverts to and returns to the aggregate of wind, and the faculties pass over into space.

(DN 2: *cātumahābhūṭiko ayaṃ puriso, yadā kālaṃ karoti, paṭhavī paṭhavikāyaṃ anupeti anupagacchati, āpo āpokāyaṃ anupeti anupagacchati, tejo tejokāyaṃ anupeti anupagacchati, vāyo vāyokāyaṃ anupeti anupagacchati, ākāsaṃ indriyāni saṅkamanti*).

When a human being, which is made up of the four elements, dies, the earth element reverts to the earth, the water [element] reverts to the water, the fire [element] reverts to the fire, the wind [element] reverts to the wind; all these break up, and the faculties revert to space.

(DĀ 27: 受四大人取命終者，地大還歸地，水還歸水，火還歸火，風還歸風，皆悉壞敗，諸根歸空).

Hence, although the body has life, when life ends there is no aftermath; the four elements break up, the mind becomes extinguished and reverts to nothing, after which there is no further rebirth.

(T 22: 於是雖有身命，壽終之後，四事散壞，心滅歸無，後不復生).

Another discourse parallel, found in the *Ekottarika-āgama* (EĀ 43.7), does not present a view related to the four elements. A parallel found in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* (Gnoli 1978,

p. 221; see also Vogel 1970, p. 11), however, has a presentation similar to the view described in the *Dīgha-nikāya* and the *Dirgha-āgama* versions, which are the first two of the three passages translated above. The third passage, stemming from a version preserved as an individual translation, conveniently sums up the main gist of the other two: with the death of the body, the mind comes to an end; there is no rebirth.

A materialist view similar to the one described above, in terms of content and even in narrative setting, can be found in a Jain text, the *Sūyagaḍa* 2.1.15 (Bollée 1977, p. 139 and Jacobi 1895/1996, p. 340). However, this articulation of materialism does not refer to the four elements.

Needless to say, from the viewpoint of both Buddhists and Jains such views are thoroughly mistaken. The early Buddhist analysis of materiality into four elements is certainly not meant to propose that there is no continuity beyond death. In this respect it resembles the thought of Empedocles, mentioned above, who also combined an analysis of materiality into four elements with a belief in rebirth (Barnes 1979/1982, p. 80).

A detailed Buddhist refutation of materialism can be found in the *Pāyāsi-sutta* and its parallels (Anālayo 2012, 2013a). The narrative setting is a debate between a materialist king and a Buddhist monk. The king describes several experiments conducted with criminals sentenced to death, who were executed in various ways to determine whether some immaterial substance can be seen to leave the body at the time of death. This description reflects the existence, in the ancient Indian setting, of the idea of trying to test a religious tenet by conducting various experiments. The Buddhist monk challenges the assumptions underlying the king's reasoning, however, and in the end wins the debate.

A counterpart to this discourse exists in the Jain tradition (Bollée 2002), with the obvious difference that the monk who refutes the materialist king's argument is a member of the Jain tradition. In short, both traditions clearly agree in repudiating the materialist position which reduces all mental events to physical processes.

## The Elements and the Self

A perspective on the four elements quite different from ancient Indian materialism can be seen in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (III.7.3), a text that predates early Buddhism. In relation to the earth element, the relevant passage offers the following statement:

What abides in the earth, being within the earth, which the earth does not know, whose body is the earth, which controls the earth from within, that is your self, the controller within, immortal.

(Radhakrishnan 1992, p. 225: *yaḥ pṛthivyāṃ tiṣṭhan pṛthivyā antaraḥ, yam pṛthivī na veda, yasya pṛthivī śarīram, yaḥ pṛthivīm antaro yamayati, eṣa ta ātmāntaryāmy amṛtaḥ*).

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* continues by making similar statements for the other three elements of water, fire, and wind, as well as for space and several other items. Just as in the case of materialism, in this case the early Buddhist position is again quite different. The mistaken assumption of a sense of selfhood in relation to the four elements (and other items) comes up for criticism in the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta* and its parallels in the following manner:

An unlearned worldling, who has no regard for noble ones and is unskilled in the teaching of noble ones, undisciplined in the teaching of noble ones, who has no regard for true persons and is unskilled in the teaching of true persons, perceives earth in relation to earth and, having perceived earth in relation to earth, imagines “earth,” imagines “on earth,” imagines “from earth,” imagines “earth is mine,” and delights in earth. What is the reason? I say it is such a one's lack of full understanding. (MN 1: *assutavā puthujjano ariyānaṃ adassāvī ariyadhammassa akovido ariyadhamme avinīto, sappurisānaṃ adassāvī sappurisadhammassa akovido sappurisadhamme avinīto paṭhavim paṭhavito sañjānāti; paṭhavim paṭhavito saññatvā paṭhavim maññati, paṭhaviyā maññati, paṭhavito maññati, paṭhavim me ti maññati, paṭhavim abhinandati. taṃ kissa hetu? apariññātaṃ tassā ti vadāmi*).

Suppose there are recluses and brahmins who have a perception of earth in relation to earth [imagining that] “earth is the self,” “earth belongs to the self,” “the self belongs to earth;” they speculate that earth is the self and in turn do not understand earth.

(MĀ 106: 若有沙門，梵志於地有地想，地即是神，地是神所，神是地所，彼計地即是神已，便不知地)。

There are recluses and brahmins who, having a perception of earth in relation to earth, delight in earth, speculate that earth is the self; they affirm that earth is the self. I say they do not understand.

(T 56: 諸有沙門婆羅門，於地有地想，樂於地，計於地為我，彼言地是我；我說彼未知)。

Worldlings, persons who have no regard for the teachings of noble ones and also do not treasure and guard the teachings spoken by the Tathāgata, do not draw close to spiritual friends, do not accept the teachings spoken by spiritual friends, view this earth as being truly known:

“this is thus earth,” certifying it to be earth as truly known: “this is earth” ... and they personally delight in it. The reason is that such statements [are made] by those who do not know.

(EĀ 44.6: 凡夫之人不親賢聖之教，亦不寶護如來言教，不親近善知識，不受善知識言教，彼觀此地如實知之，此是地如審是地，如實是地 ... 於中而自娛樂；所以然者，非智者之所說也；adopting the variant 寶 instead of 掌).

With some differences in formulation, the parallel versions draw attention to the potential of an apperception of earth to lead to various imaginings, culminating in the construal of a notion of self. Although the last version does not explicitly refer to such notions, perhaps the same should be seen as implicit in the reference to delighting in earth. The parallel versions continue by applying a similar treatment to the other three elements and various other items. They also agree in contrasting the resultant predicament to the case of those who have a proper understanding and for this reason will not fall prey to the various vain imaginings described above.

It seems not too farfetched to propose that the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta* and its parallels reflect a critical attitude toward notions of the type reflected in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*. As Gombrich (1984, p. 97) explained:

Unlike the authors of the Upaniṣads (and of almost all other Sanskrit religious texts), the Buddha was no brahmin. Indeed, he was probably born and brought up in a society (the Sakya) which had no brahmins. Coming on brahminical categories as a mature adult, he could manipulate and play with them.

The need to beware of vain imaginings in relation to the four elements, a theme common to the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta* and its parallels, holds similarly for the set of six elements. This can be seen in a survey of different qualities of an arahant, provided in the *Chabbisodhana-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. The two versions agree in depicting the attitude of an arahant toward the six elements as being free of any appropriation as me or mine. For the case of the earth element, this proceeds as follows:

Friends, I treated the earth element as not being a self, there being no self in dependence on the earth element. (MN 112: *paṭhavīdhātuṃ kho ahaṃ, āvuso, anattato upagacchīṃ, na ca paṭhavīdhātunissitaṃ attānaṃ*).

I do not view the earth element as mine, nor myself as pertaining to the earth element, nor the earth element as a self.

(MĀ 187: 我不見地界是我所，我非地界所，地界非是神).

The two versions continue by highlighting that the complete destruction of any clinging to the elements is a quality characteristic of an arahant. In this way, relating the elements to notions of a permanent self shares the fate of the materialist reduction of a human being to a mere combination of these elements. From an early Buddhist perspective, both are considered to reflect a lack of proper understanding.

## Transcendence of the Elements

The development of proper understanding in turn leads to a transcendence of the elements. Such transcendence stands in the background of a description in a *Dīgha-nikāya* discourse of a monk touring different celestial realms in search of an answer to the question where the four elements will completely cease (DN 11, DĀ 24, Zhou 2008). His search for someone capable to provide him with an answer is in vain, and eventually the highest of the celestial denizens takes him to the side and recommends that he should much rather go to ask the Buddha this question. The Buddha then provides an answer in verse, which culminates in referring to the cessation of consciousness (see in more detail Anālayo 2017). In other words, the solution is to be found in the mind, rather than in some external cessation of the elements.

The same need to go beyond various celestial realms and forms of knowledge (recognized in the ancient Indian setting) in order to transcend the four elements comes up in a different form in a discourse found among the Elevens of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. The discourse begins with the contrast between a wild colt and a thoroughbred. A meditator comparable with a wild colt is overwhelmed by the five hindrances and consequently mismeditates in dependence on the four elements and various other items. In contrast, a meditator similar to a thoroughbred stays free from the five hindrances and meditates without depending on the four elements, etc., in the following manner:

One does not meditate in dependence on the earth, nor meditate in dependence on water, nor meditate in dependence on fire, nor meditate in dependence on wind, nor meditate in dependence on the sphere of boundless space, nor meditate in dependence on the sphere of boundless consciousness, nor meditate in dependence on the sphere of nothingness, nor meditate in dependence on the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, nor meditate in dependence on this world, nor meditate in dependence on the other world, nor meditate in dependence on what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, and examined by the mind. Yet, one meditates.

(AN 11.10: *so n' eva paṭhaviṃ nissāya jhāyati, na āpaṃ nissāya jhāyati, na tejaṃ nissāya jhāyati, na vāyaṃ*

*nissāya jhāyati, na ākāsaññāyatanam nissāya jhāyati, na viññānaññāyatanam nissāya jhāyati, na ākiñcaññāyatanam nissāya jhāyati, na nevasaññānāsaññāyatanam nissāya jhāyati, na idhalokam nissāya jhāyati, na paralokam nissāya jhāyati, yam p' idam diṭṭham sutam mutam viññātam pattam pariyesitam anuvicaritam manasā, tam pi nissāya na jhāyati; jhāyati ca pana).*

According to the Pāli commentary, the meditation described here takes Nirvana as its object (Mp V 80: *nibbānārammaṇāya phalasamāpattiyā jhāyati*). The *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse has parallels in the two *Samyukta-āgama* collections (T 99 and T 100) which proceed in this way:

One who meditates like this does not cultivate meditation in dependence on the earth, nor cultivate meditation in dependence on water, fire, wind, space, consciousness, nothingness, neither-perception-nor-non-perception, and also does not cultivate meditation in dependence on this world, nor in dependence on that world, nor [in dependence] on the sun and the moon, nor [in dependence] on what is seen, heard, experienced, and cognized, nor [in dependence] on what is attained, nor [in dependence] on what is sought for, nor [in dependence] on what is accordingly experienced, nor [in dependence] on what is accordingly contemplated.

(SĀ 926: 如是禪者, 不依地修禪, 不依水, 火, 風, 空, 識, 無所有, 非想非非想而修禪。不依此世, 不依他世, 非日, 月, 非見, 聞, 覺, 識, 非得, 非求, 非隨覺, 非隨觀而修禪)。

Like this, one arouses a state of meditation that does not depend on those [elements of] earth, water, fire, and wind, and also does not further depend on the four immaterial concentrations, does not depend on this world, does not depend on that world, also does not further depend on the sun, the moon, and the stars, does not depend on what is seen and heard, does not depend on what is cognized by consciousness, does not depend on what is known by knowledge, does not depend on investigating the mind, consciousness, and the mind element, also does not depend on the cessation of perception and knowledge or on attaining nothingness, and does not depend on the cessation of meditation.

(SĀ<sup>2</sup> 151: 如是不依於彼地水火風, 亦復不依四無色定而生禪法, 不依此世, 不依他世, 亦復不依日月星辰, 不依見聞, 不依識識, 不依智知, 不依推求心識境界, 亦不依止覺知, 獲得無所, 依止禪)。

A Gāndhārī fragment has preserved parts of this passage, containing the references to meditating without depending on

earth, water, and fire, without depending on the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, without depending on this world or the other world, and without depending on what is seen (Jantrasrisalai et al. 2016, pp. 87–88).

The *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse and its two *Samyukta-āgama* parallels agree that someone who meditates in this way will be worshipped by the various celestial beings recognized in early Buddhist cosmology, who express their inability to discern what this human thoroughbred is meditating on. A similar description of various celestial beings worshipping a meditator occurs in a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* (SN 22.79), where the context shows that the meditator in question has reached the final goal. This relates to the discourse taken up above, which showed that the different denizens of the heavens were unable to provide a satisfactory reply to the query about what transcends the four elements.

The *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse under discussion continues by explaining that in this meditation, which is beyond the ken of any celestial being, the perception of the four elements, etc., have “disappeared” (*vibhūta*, see Ñāṇananda 2006, p. 354 and Bodhi 2012, p. 1861 n. 2211). The two parallels instead speak of “being able to subdue” such perceptions (SĀ 926: 能伏) or of “not viewing them as having reality” (SĀ<sup>2</sup> 151: 不見有真實)。

Presentations similar to the part of the above *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse that depicts the meditation of a thoroughbred occurs in several other discourses (without an explicit mention of the overcoming of the hindrances), found among the Tens and Elevens of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. These share the description of a meditative experience, literally an “attainment of concentration” (*samādhipaṭilābha*), that no longer involves a perception of the four elements, the four immaterial or formless spheres, and this world or the other world (AN 10.6, AN 10.7, AN 11.7, AN 11.8, AN 11.9, AN 11.19, AN 11.20, AN 11.21, and AN 11.22; see also Dhammānā 2020). Another element shared by these Pāli discourses is the explicit specification that such acquisition of concentration takes Nirvana as its object. What the meditator “perceives” at such a time (or what according to AN 11.8 the meditator “pays attention to,” *manasikaroti*) is an experience expressed by the following maxim:

This is peaceful, this is sublime, namely: the calming of all constructions, the letting go of all supports, the extinguishing of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nirvana.

(AN 10.6, AN 11.7, AN 11.8, AN 11.9, AN 11.19, AN 11.20, AN 11.21, and AN 11.22: *etaṃ santam etaṃ pañītam yad idam sabbasaṅkhārasamatho sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggo taṇhākkhaya virāgo nirodho nibbānan ti*).

One of these discourses (AN 11.8) furthermore specifies that the reference is to the “highest track,” *aggapada*, which the commentary confirms to intend Nirvana (Mp V 79: *aggapadasmin ti nibbāne*). Another way of pointing to the experience of Nirvana then takes the following form:

The cessation of becoming is Nirvana, the cessation of becoming is Nirvana.  
(AN 10.7: *bhavanirodho nibbānaṃ bhavanirodho nibbānan ti*).

In sum, the distinctly early Buddhist approach to transcending the four elements does not require a journey through the different celestial realms, including the immaterial or formless realms. Complete transcendence of the four elements rather requires meditative attention to the perception of Nirvana.

## The Elements and Brahminical Cosmology

The proposed assessment of the material covered thus far needs to be explored further by shifting to a critical examination of a quite different perspective on the above passages proposed by Wynne (2007, p. 39), who argued that early Buddhism followed a precedent set by Brahminical thought. According to his judgment, both traditions “believed that liberation was achieved by means of a meditative progression through the material elements and a few higher states of consciousness beyond them. The conceptual background to element meditation is provided by the cosmological thought of early Brahminism.” The position taken in this way forms part of a complex argument in support of the historicity of two teachers of the Buddha before his awakening. Within the confines of this article, it is not possible to do full justice to this argument, so that in what follows only those parts directly relevant to the present concerns will be taken up.

In order to establish a textual basis for suggesting an influence of Brahminical cosmology on early Buddhist meditation theory, Wynne (2007, p. 31) proposed that the above *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourses show “that in early Buddhism the practice of element meditation was thought to lead to states of abstract consciousness (the formless spheres) and finally liberation.” His reading of these passage as reflecting such a progression is based on rejecting the assessment of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage translated above (AN 11.10) by Bronkhorst (1993/2000, p. 92), who commented that here the four elements (and the other items mentioned) “can, but should not be used as objects of meditation.” Wynne (2007, p. 139 n. 21) objected: “I cannot think of any reason why they ‘should not be used as objects of meditation,’ when in other places most of them do appear as objects of meditation.” Yet,

the discourse under discussion clearly implies that one should not meditate in dependence on the four elements (nor on the other items in the list).

Some lack of fully appreciating the import of the above passages appears to be also evident in the comment by Wynne (2007, p. 30) that this world and the other world are “not a proper object of meditation,” being usually rather referenced in descriptions of right and wrong view. Whereas right view affirms their existence, wrong view denies this. The issue at stake in the present passage, however, appears to be much rather that the meditation described does not depend on an object related to this world or the other world. This is quite a different topic; in fact, the existence of this world and the other world is in a way taken for granted here.

The same holds for another Pāli passage that employs the contrast between this world and the other world in an instruction that one should train not to cling to either (MN 143: *na idhalokaṃ upādiyissāmi ... na paralokaṃ upādiyissāmi*), avoiding that consciousness becomes dependent on this world (*idhalokanissitaṃ*) or dependent on the other world (*paralokanissitaṃ*). A similar presentation can be found in one of its Chinese *Āgama* parallels (EĀ 51.8: 不起今世, 後世, 不依今世, 後世而起於識). Besides employing the contrast between this world and the other world, both versions also bring in the idea of dependency, similar to the passage under discussion. Here, too, the existence of this world and the other world is in a way taken for granted, the issue at stake being instead whether one clings to one of them.

Wynne (2007, p. 31) further reasoned that the presentation in the discourses surveyed above was “initially based on a meditative sequence ending with the ‘sphere of neither perception nor non-perception.’ This list was probably elaborated by the addition of two or three items in order that it could be included in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*’s book of ‘Tens’ and ‘Elevens.’”

Yet, the two *Samyukta-āgama* parallels quoted above, as well as the Gāndhārī fragment, also mention these items. These parallels from different transmission lineages thereby provide strong corroboration of the Pāli list of items. Besides, since the *Samyukta-āgama* collections are based on assembling discourses by topic rather than by numerals, the *Samyukta-āgama* discourses had no need for additions in order to arrive at a list of ten or eleven items.

Even if the last items mentioned are left aside and the passage were to be reduced to just listing the four elements and the four formless spheres, it would still not imply meditating on the former to reach the latter and then proceed to liberation. For one, the elements and formless spheres are alternatives and not presented as a consecutive series. In other words, these presentations do not concern a meditative sequence through which one should proceed or not. Moreover, the first part of the discourse shows the one who meditates in dependence

on any of these to be under the influence of the hindrances. This makes it impossible to assume that such a practice could lead to liberation.

In addition to this type of presentation, Wynne (2007, p. 31) considered listings of ten objects of concentration, known as *kaṣiṇas*, to provide further evidence that “connects the formless spheres to the four elements.” In such listings, however, the same problem applies, in that the four elements occur individually rather than as a set (see, e.g., AN 10.29 and its parallels MĀ 215 and Up 5011). The listing of ten *kaṣiṇas* presents alternatives; it is not a description of consecutive stages of meditation. The fire *kaṣiṇa*, for example, can be cultivated without any need to have previously cultivated the *kaṣiṇas* of earth and water. In fact, the list continues from the four elements to four colors. None of these colors requires previous meditation on the four elements. The same holds for the last two *kaṣiṇas* of space and consciousness, which do not require the cultivation of the previously mentioned items. This is simply a list, not a description of a meditative sequence.

The above decisively undermines the conclusion drawn by Wynne (2007, p. 49) that “element meditation is connected to formless meditation in the early Pāli texts, in lists where the two sets of objects are combined,” (as in the type of presentation discussed above) “and in the list of *kaṣiṇāyāna-s* ... The doctrinal background to both lists is provided by ... cosmological ideas of early Brahmanism.” In relation to a particular passage in the *Mahābhārata*, he then proposed (p. 66):

It seems, then, that some of the early Buddhists must have been influenced by the sort of meditative scheme related to the Brahminic cosmogony found in Mbh [*Mahābhārata*] XII.224 ... All the Buddhist lists of element and formless meditation seem to be elaborations of such a scheme of element meditation ... despite the lack of any pre-Buddhist text on element meditation.

This is hardly persuasive. In fact, even the bare parallelism in the sequence of listing the four elements is probably of no further significance, given that the same sequence is also adopted in preSocratic Greek philosophy. Rather than being a sign of the influence of one tradition on another, this sequence is quite probably simply a natural way of listing the four elements according to increasing subtlety.

Another example for supposed Brahminical influence concerns a comparison of controlling anger to a skillful charioteer, found in a *Dhammapada* verse (Dhp 222) and in the *Mahābhārata* (I.79.2; the reference in Wynne 2007, p. 28 to “I.74.2” appears to be an error). Wynne (2007, p. 29) drew the conclusion that “the similar versions of the chariot metaphor in both the early Buddhist and Brahminic literatures even suggest that early Buddhism was influenced by the meditative ideas of early Brahminism.”

A rather minor point, although perhaps still worth mentioning, is that in both verses the illustration concerns a capable “charioteer” as an illustration for controlling anger, rather than a “chariot” (the term “chariot,” *ratha*, is only mentioned in the Pāli version). Regarding this illustration, it is not clear to what extent a reference to controlling anger should be considered to reflect “meditative ideas,” even if elsewhere the *Mahābhārata* relates the charioteer imagery to control of the six senses (Wynne 2007, p. 29). The commentary on the *Dhammapada* explains that this verse was spoken in relation to a tree deity successfully controlling its anger (Dhp-a III 300), which gives the impression that, at least from the viewpoint of the Pāli commentarial tradition, the main point of the verse was not to convey a meditative idea.

Another problem concerns dating, as the argument that Brahminical ideas influenced early Buddhist thought would become considerably more plausible if it could be established that the relevant portion in the *Mahābhārata* indeed predates the early Buddhist period. Based on a detailed study of the complexity of this text, Winternitz (1908, p. 399) explained that the dating of each piece, even of each verse in this work, needs to be determined individually, concluding that statements of a chronological type, by way of claiming that something is already found in the *Mahābhārata*, are unjustified and even meaningless (“Es folg aus all dem die wichtige Lehre, daß in Wirklichkeit das Alter eines jeden Stückes des Mahābhārata, ja eines jeden einzelnen Verses für sich bestimmt werden muss, und daß Aussprüche wie ‘Das kommt schon im Mahābhārata vor’ keinerlei Berechtigung und in chronologischer Beziehung gar keinen Sinn haben”). In this respect the *Mahābhārata* differs from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, mentioned above, which does indeed predate the period of early Buddhism.

Wynne (2007, p. 29) in fact admitted that, although he considered “a Brahminic origin of these chariot metaphors likely, this cannot be established with absolute certainty.” Nevertheless, Wynne (2007, p. 28) argued that “the widespread occurrence of the chariot metaphor in the early Brahminic literature suggests it has a Brahminic origin.”

Yet, metaphorical references to a chariot or a charioteer can also be found in several early Buddhist discourses (Rhys Davids 1906/1907, pp. 127 and 144). Besides, it is not clear why frequency of occurrence should be considered a marker of originality. Take for example some Pāli term found only rarely in the discourses and much more frequently in the commentaries. Surely, this would not warrant the conclusion that the term must be of commentarial origin.

In sum, although Vedic chariot imagery must have provided a precedent (Sparreboom 1985), it seems difficult to determine whether this was taken up first in the *Mahābhārata* verse quoted above or rather in its *Dhammapada* counterpart in order to illustrate the controlling of anger with the example of a skillful charioteer. For this reason, it seems preferable to

follow Rau (1959, p. 170), who had already noted the present case as part of his study of instances of parallelism between the *Dhammapada* and non-Buddhist texts, by avoiding the taking of any stance on which text influenced the other, at least until definite evidence for such influence can be adduced.

In apparent anticipation of objections to his overall conclusions, Wynne (2007, p. 110) reasoned that a critical appraisal of his presentation could see “little reason to think that the Buddhist sort of element meditation can have been absorbed from early Brahmanism.” Such appraisal could then consider him to have “conflated different aspects of early Buddhist meditation theory (element meditation and formless meditation) and projected them back to a pre-Buddhist period.” This appears to be indeed what has happened, as the assumption by Wynne (2007, p. 111) that the “Buddhist evidence suggests otherwise” turns out to be based on a misinterpretation of the evidence adduced.

In sum, the cultivation of the formless or immaterial realms does not necessitate previous meditation on the four elements. Instead of following precedents set by Brahminical cosmology, early Buddhist meditation theory evinces a concern with deconstructing Brahminical ideas regarding the elements. An example related to the practice of the *kasīṇas* in particular can be found in a discourse in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* and its *Samyukta-āgama* parallel.

Sister, for some recluses and brahmins the earth *kasīṇa* is the supreme attainment and became their goal. Sister, the Blessed One directly knew to what extent the earth *kasīṇa* is the supreme attainment. Directly knowing it, the Blessed One saw its beginning, saw its disadvantage, saw the release from it, and saw knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path [in relation to it]. Because of seeing its beginning, because of seeing its disadvantage, because of seeing the release from it, and because of knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path [in relation to it], he knew the gaining of the goal, the peace of heart.

(AN 10.26: *paṭhavīkasīṇasamāpattiparamā kho, bhagini, eke samaṇabrāhmaṇā atthābhinihbattesuṃ. yāvataṃ kho, bhagini, paṭhavīkasīṇasamāpattiparamatā, tad abhiññāsi bhagavā. tad abhiññāya bhagavā ādim addasa ādīnavam addasa nissaraṇam addasa maggāmaggañāṇadassanam addasa. tassa ādīdassana hetu ādīnavadassana hetu nissaraṇadassana hetu maggāmaggañāṇadassana hetu atthassa patti hadayassa santi viditā hoti*).

Sister, there are some recluses and brahmins who proclaim that being in quest for the fruit of the attainment of the earth *kasīṇa* is supreme. Sister, suppose recluses and

brahmins are purified in relation to the attainment of the earth *kasīṇa* by seeing its origin, seeing its disadvantage, seeing its cessation, and seeing the path to its cessation. Because of seeing its origin, seeing its disadvantage, seeing its cessation, and seeing the path to its cessation, they attain knowledge of the truth in relation to the mind, becoming tranquil and free from confusion.

(SĀ 549: 姊妹，有一沙門婆羅門言：地一切入處正受，此則無上，為求此果。姊妹，若沙門婆羅門於地一切入處正受，清淨鮮白者，則見其本，見患，見滅，見滅道跡。以見本，見患，見滅，見滅道跡故，得真實義存於心，寂滅而不亂)。

Alongside some variations, the overall point in the two parallels is clearly to showcase the Buddha’s criticism of the assumption by some contemporary recluses and brahmins that the final goal is the attainment of the earth *kasīṇa* (or other *kasīṇas*).

## Mindfully Contemplating the Elements

Setting aside the unconvincing proposal that listings of the *kasīṇas*, etc., follow precedents supposedly set by Brahminical cosmology, other references to the basic list of the four elements, as admitted by Wynne (2007, p. 35), “seem to have very little relationship with early Brahminic thought.” This certainly applies to their mindful contemplation, as described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels, whose chief concern appears to be a realization of the quite specifically Buddhist doctrine of not self, here in particular in relation to the body.

Such realization of not self or emptiness can undermine the sense of ownership toward the body and dissolve patterns of identification with its particular appearance. It also brings home the basic similarity in nature between one’s own body and those of others as well as other external manifestations of materiality. The same mindful contemplation can also reveal the dependency of the body on the four elements in the environment. The body needs earth element in the form of food, water element in the form of beverages, the fire element in terms of a balanced temperature range provided by clothing and shelter, and wind element in the form of breathing (Anālayo 2018). Such dependency in turn has wide-ranging ramifications, in particularly relevant to the need to take care of the natural environment in such a way as to ensure the basic conditions for the survival of human bodies in the face of the threat posed by global warming (Anālayo 2019).

In this way, taking off from a doctrinal position that eschews both materialist annihilationism and metaphysical eternalism, mindful contemplation can be seen to offer a distinctly Buddhist perspective on the significance of the four elements.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares he has no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies performed by the author with human participants or animals.

**Abbreviations** AN, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; DĀ, *Dīrgha-āgama* (T 1); Dh, *Dhammapada*; Dh-a, *Dhammapada- aṭṭhakathā*; DN, *Dīgha-nikāya*; EĀ, *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; Mp, *Manorathapūraṇī*; Ps, *Papañcasūdanī*; SĀ, *Samyukta-āgama* (T 99); SĀ<sup>2</sup>, *Samyukta-āgama* (T 100); SN, *Samyutta-nikāya*; T, Taishō edition; Up, *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-tīkā*

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