

# TRICYCLE

Copyright 2024. Tricycle. All rights reserved.

## The Elemental Self

By Ayya Khema

WINTER 2018

Everything consists of the **four primary elements**: earth, fire, water, and air. Observing the presence of all four of these elements within us, or even just one of them, can be an important way of recognizing how our individual composition is the same as the composition of the rest of the universe. This may be an intellectual understanding at first, but eventually, with practice, it can become a feeling—one of being exactly the same as everything around us.

Anything that we can touch has the earth element: our body—our flesh, bones, and hair; the ground; even water. We humans, reliant as we are upon what we can **see and touch**, are most concerned with this earth element, particularly as it relates to the body. The body should have the right shape, the right color, the right age, and the right abilities. But really our bodies are nothing more than an assortment of components that are found throughout the universe.

The fire element indicates temperature—warm or cold—and the capacity to digest or to eat. Our margin of comfort for internal temperatures—between 60 and 80 degrees Fahrenheit—is rather small. According to some Buddhist traditions, however, we can expand our comfort level and open ourselves up to the realization that our body contains all temperatures.

The water element implies not only water but also blood, urine, sweat, tears, and so on. It's also the binding element: it makes things hang together. If you add water to flour, for instance, you get dough. Adult human bodies are composed up to 60 percent of water; if they weren't, the cells would probably wander around separately, because there would be no binding element.

And last but not least, the air element refers to the body's breath, wind, and movement. Whenever we move, it's as though the wind has taken over. Even when we walk, we can see that we are dispersing air and creating movement, however subtle.

When we meditate on these four primary elements in ourselves and in the outer world, we no longer feel threatened by external forces or situations, because we recognize that *everything*, and *everyone*, is composed of these same four elements. We see that there are no distinctions between one and the other, and are thereby able to realize the complete oneness of existence and manifestation. Without the feeling of separation from the rest of the world, we also lose the need to strain and stress to be better, more clever, or more accomplished. We can start to **just be**. That's all there is to it.

Here's how to practice meditation on the four elements:

First, put your attention on the breath for just a moment.

Then, feel the solidity—the earth element—of your body. Touch your hands or your knees, or feel your mouth where the lips meet. Feel the bones throughout your body, the skin above them, and notice the subtle pressure of the eyelids on the eyes.

Let that feeling of solidity flow into and merge with the earth element of the cushion that you sit on. Then become aware of the earth element in the soles of your feet and in the floor or mat. Again, let the two earth elements merge.

Now imagine that you are going to walk outside. With each step that you take, the earth element in your feet merges with the earth element of the floor you walk on. You walk to the door, and as you put your hand on the doorknob, the earth element in the palm of your hand merges and flows into the earth element of the door, which you now open.

Imagine walking outside, your feet merging with the literal earth beneath you. You walk over to the nearest tree and lean back against its trunk, allowing your body to merge with its solidity. No separation.

Visualize yourself continuing to walk outside and coming upon a stream. You put your hand into the stream and feel the water's solidity pressing against your fingers, recognizing that this solidity is what allows boats to float and fish to swim.

You look up at the sky and let your body's earth element flow into the clouds, which have their own solidity. There's no division, no separation—only merging. To one side you see a friend, whose body also contains the earth element, and you both observe that shared experience.

Now come back to your immediate surroundings and return to the breath. In this second exercise, focus your awareness on the temperature in your body. Some parts may be warm; other parts may be cold. What is the temperature of the cushion or chair you're sitting on? In the same way as before, let the two—the warmth or coolness in yourself and in your seat—merge together. Do the same with your feet on the floor. Become aware of the temperature in the soles of your feet and the temperature of the floor. Let them become one.

Go through the same imagination exercise as before—walking to the door, going outside, leaning against the tree, touching the water, looking at the sky, and seeing a friend—but do so with your focus placed on the fire element. Feel the temperature of the earth, the water, and the sunshine in the air. Imagine going into the shade, and how that changes your interaction with fire. The coolness touches your body and generates feeling. The shade and you yourself are not separate.

Now go to the nearest tree and touch it with your hand, feeling its temperature. Merge your own feeling of warmth with the warmth of the tree, and realize that you're no longer separate from that tree. Imagine leaning back against the tree, absorbing the warmth from the sun's rays or the coolness of the shade and tuning into the fact that you and the tree share the same fire element in the form of temperature.

For each of the two remaining elements, water and air, repeat the steps outlined above, always first tuning into the breath, then focusing in turn on the element of water and air in the body, then imagining yourself navigating the external world of elements. All the while, recognize that you share the experience of that element with everything you encounter—the wet morning dew; dry, crackly leaves; birds zooming through the air; clouds drifting above. Use your sensory imagination to weave a rich tapestry of connection.

With practice, one day we will recognize that all phenomena are composed of and dependent upon the interaction and merging of these four elements. We will realize that all of it—the entire universe—is just one **continuous manifestation**. And that we, ourselves, are no different.



*This edited version of Ayya Khema's dharma talk "Contemplation on the Four Great Elements" was reprinted with permission of Buddha-Haus, Germany, © Buddha-haus ([buddha-haus.de](http://buddha-haus.de)).*



This article is a part of the special section “Meditations Off the Beaten Path” in *Tricycle’s* Winter 2018 issue. The other articles in this section are:

**“Listening to Silence,”**

by Dharma Master Hsin Tao, edited by Maria Reis Habito

**“Pure and Simple Practice,”**

by Dharmavidya David Brazier

**“Breathe Deep,”**

by Ken Kushner

Ayya Khema (1923–1997) was an international Buddhist teacher, and the first Western woman to become a Theravada Buddhist nun. An advocate of Buddhist women's rights, in 1987 she helped coordinate the first conference for the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women in Bodh Gaya, India.