

\*Meditation on the Elements\*

//(A translation of a text by Ven. Ledi Sayadaw followed by an  
 explanation by Sayagyi U Chit Tin) //

1. There is in this body of mine: the earth group[1], the water group, the fire group, the wind group, and the consciousness group.

2. What is the group of earth in this [body of mine]? It is: hair of the head, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, liver, midriff, spleen, lungs, intestines, entrails, stomach, excrement, and the brain.[2] These are to be called the earth group.

3. What is the group of water in this [body of mine]? It is bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, mucus, oil of the joints, and urine. These are to be called the water group.

4. What is the group of fire in this [body of mine]? It is burning, warmth, digestion, and ageing. These are to be called the fire group.

5. What is the group of wind (motion) in this [body of mine]? Winds that go up, winds that go down, winds in the abdomen, winds in the belly, winds that shoot through all the limbs, the in-breath, and the out-breath. These are to be called the wind group.

6. What is the group of consciousness in this [body of mine]? Eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body (contact) consciousness, and mental [objects] consciousness. These are to be called the consciousness group.

7. In the group of the hair of the head, the action that is hard is named earth; the action that is cohesion is named water; the action that is heat is named fire; the action that is support is named wind; colour, odour, taste, and nutritive essence are thereby derived; all conditioned mental states are dependently originated, without a self, without a soul, empty, and void; they are subject to destruction, subject to falling away, and subject to fading away; because of destruction they are impermanent; because they fall away they are misery; because they are without substance they are without a self.

8. Similarly, [the same should be understood for] the groups of body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, liver, midriff, spleen, lungs, intestines, entrails, stomach, excrement, and the brain.

9. In the group of the bile, the action that is hard is named earth; the action that is cohesion is named water; the action that is heat is named fire; the action that is support is named wind; colour, odour, taste, and nutritive essence are derived; all these conditioned mental states are dependently originated, without a self, without a soul, empty, and void; they are subject to destruction, subject to falling away, and subject to fading away; because of destruction they are impermanent; because they fall away they are misery; because they are without substance they are without a self.

10. Similarly, [the same should be understood for] the groups of phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, mucus, oil of the joints, and urine.

11. In the group of burning, the action that is hard is named earth; the action that is cohesion is named water; the action that is heat is

named fire; the action that is support is named wind; colour, odour, taste, and nutritive essence are derived; all these conditioned mental states are dependently originated, without a self, without a soul, empty, and void; they are subject to destruction, subject to falling away, and subject to fading away; because of destruction they are impermanent; because they fall away they are misery; because they are without substance they are without a self.

12. Similarly, [the same should be understood for] the groups of warmth, digestion, and ageing.

13. In the group of winds that go up, the action that is hard is named earth; the action that is cohesion is named water; the action that is heat is named fire; the action that is support is named wind; colour, odour, taste, and nutritive essence are derived; all these conditioned mental states are dependently originated, without a self, without a soul, empty, and void; they are subject to destruction, subject to falling away, and subject to fading away; because of destruction they are impermanent; because they fall away they are misery; because they are without substance they are without a self.

14. Similarly, [the same should be understood for] the groups of winds that go down, winds in the abdomen, winds in the belly, winds that shoot through all the limbs, the in-breath, and the out-breath.

15. In the group of the eye consciousness, there are the four aggregates: (1) sensation is the aggregate of sensations, (2) perception is the aggregate of perceptions, (3) volitional thought is the aggregate of formations, (4) consciousness is the aggregate of consciousness. All these conditioned mental states are dependently originated, without a self, without a soul, empty, and void; they are subject to destruction, subject to falling away, and subject to fading away; because of destruction they are impermanent; because they fall away they are misery; because they are without substance they are without a self.

16. Similarly, [the same should be understood for] the groups of ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body (contact) consciousness, and mental (objects) consciousness.

17. Thus, in this body of mine, these forty-eight aspects, the group of (physical) elements, the group of (mental) states, [all of these] are dependently originated, without a self, without a soul, empty, and void; they are subject to destruction, subject to falling away, subject to fading away, and subject to destruction; because of destruction they are impermanent; because they fall away they are misery; because they are without substance they are without a self.

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The text above is a translation of a Pali text by Venerable Ledi Sayadaw. Details of this meditation subject are found in numerous texts in the Pali Canon[3] and in Ashin Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga.[4] Two discourses given by the Buddha to his son, Venerable Rahula, are especially pertinent to understanding how to meditate on the four elements and on the consciousness group. In "The Great Exhortation to Rahula,"[5] the Buddha instructs Ven. Rahula to meditate on the four elements. In "The Shorter Exhortation to Rahula,"[6] he teaches him how to observe the senses and the states of consciousness associated with them.

The first discourse to Ven. Rahula is of particular interest to meditators in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin as it shows how meditation on the four elements can be an aid to mindfulness of breathing

and insight meditation. According to the commentary, Ven. Rahula was eighteen when the Buddha gave this discourse. It seems that as Ven. Rahula was following the Buddha going out on the alms round one morning, he thought to himself, "I am handsome like my father, the Blessed One. The Buddha's form is beautiful, and mine is similar to his." The Buddha read Ven. Rahula's thoughts and decided to reprove him. This he did in an indirect way, but Ven. Rahula was able to understand immediately as soon as a hint was given to him.

The Buddha's reproach was in the form of a meditation subject. He instructed Ven. Rahula to dissociate himself from all material form (rupa) by saying to himself with reference to all material forms: "This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self." The Buddha, therefore, was giving his son a meditation subject that was directly related to his lack of understanding, and the method given was directly related to developing insight into the lack of a permanent self (anatta). Ven. Rahula asked the Buddha if only material form was to be seen in this way, so the Buddha enlarged on his first instruction by saying that the same was true for all five of the aggregates that sustain renewed existence: material forms (rupa), sensations (vedana), perceptions (sanna), mental formations (sankhara), and consciousness (vinnana).

Ven. Rahula decided that, after being given such instructions by the Buddha, he should not continue on the alms round but begin to meditate immediately. As he sat meditating, Ven. Sariputta came by. The commentary says that when the chief disciples resided in the same monastery as the Buddha, they always waited until he went out before they went on their alms round. Ven. Sariputta had ordained Ven. Rahula and was therefore one of his teachers. Seeing him seated in the cross-legged position and not being aware that the Buddha had already given a meditation subject, Ven. Sariputta told his pupil to develop mindfulness of breathing (anapana-sati).

Ven. Rahula now had two different sets of instructions, and he was not able to make any progress. That evening, he went to the Buddha for more details on how to proceed. He simply asked how mindfulness of breathing was to be developed. The Buddha did not tell Ven. Rahula to go back to the original instructions he had been given. Instead, he gave a discourse in which he showed him how to use meditation on the elements, the four divine abidings, contemplation of impurity,[7] and the perception of impermanence as preparation for mindfulness of breathing. He said that contemplation of the elements[8] will lead to the same realization that he had told Ven. Rahula to work for that morning: "This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self." In this way, he would be repulsed by each of the elements and detached from them.

The Buddha instructs Ven. Rahula to develop detachment with respect to agreeable and disagreeable sensory impressions by considering the indifference of the elements to anything with which they come into contact whether it be clean or unclean, faeces or urine or spittle or pus or blood. The earth is not troubled or worried or disgusted by any of these, nor is water or fire or wind or space. In this way, the Buddha gave a more detailed way to meditate on mind (sensations, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness) and body.

The next meditation subjects explained by the Buddha will help eliminate harmful mental states: loving kindness will eliminate ill will, compassion will eliminate harming, sympathetic joy will eliminate aversion, equanimity will eliminate repugnance, contemplation of impurity will eliminate sensual desire, and the perception of impermanence will eliminate egotism. After explaining all these types of meditation, the Buddha then instructs Ven. Rahula in mindfulness of breathing in great detail, including attaining the absorption states (jhanas).

We can see, then, that contemplation of the elements as given in Ven. Ledi Sayadaw's text may be helpful for meditators who also develop concentration through mindfulness of breathing and insight through knowing impermanence (anicca).

Ashin Buddhaghosa gives a long explanation of how to meditate on the parts of the body and on the elements in the Visuddhimagga.[9] He begins his description of meditating on the parts of the body by saying that this meditation subject, which helps to develop insight, is only available during the period in which a Buddha's Teachings are available. This is no doubt because one of the main elements in observing the body is learning to appreciate the lack of a permanent, controlling self. In his first discussion of meditating on the parts of the body, Ashin Buddhaghosa includes seeing them as repulsive. When he discusses the inclusion of the parts of the body in the meditation on the four great elements, however, they are not to be seen as repulsive but should be experienced as having the various characteristics of the four great elements: solidity, cohesion, heat, and support. For meditation students who have already made some progress in developing concentration and insight, it will not be necessary to develop any further an appreciation of the repulsive nature of the parts of the body. But the appreciation of the temporary coming together of the four great elements in the various parts of the body can be used in connection with appreciating their impermanence. None of these four elements exists independently of the other three. The parts of the body associated with each element possess that element as the predominant characteristic, but all four will be present to a greater or lesser extent.

Many of Ashin Buddhaghosa's instructions for the meditator will be of use no matter which technique is being followed, so we will give some of them here. Ashin Buddhaghosa makes it clear that the meditator must find the method that helps him progress. Someone may know all the Pali Canon but will still need to simply repeat the names of the parts of the body in order to keep the attention on them and to gain insight into their true nature. It is clear from what he says that theoretical knowledge is no substitute for practice. He gives many ways of investigating the parts of the body -- by colour, shape, direction, location, limiting what is similar and dissimilar -- but these are less useful for us. His insistence on the importance of repetition is valid for all meditation practice, however, as this is the way to make the meditation subject become familiar and to keep the mind from running away. Ashin Buddhaghosa is speaking of repeating the names of the parts of the body, but repetition can also include repeating the task at hand.

Ashin Buddhaghosa then gives ten types of skill to be developed by the meditator:

First, the proper order should be followed. In a general way, each technique has an order in which things are to be done, and we should be careful to respect the right order. If we do not, he says, we will be exhausted by skipping around, like someone trying to go up a ladder two rungs at a time.

Second and third, the meditator should not go too fast or too slow. If we are in too big a hurry, we will be like a man who never notices the way even though he has made a long journey a hundred times and constantly has to ask directions. If we are too slow, we will resemble a man who wastes so much time on a journey it takes him two or three days rather than one.

Fourth, we must avoid distractions, otherwise, we will be like a man going along a narrow ledge on a high cliff. If he does not pay attention,

he may fall.

Fifth, we should not get hung up on concepts; we should rather develop true understanding. Concepts, or mere intellectual understanding, are like a sign to show where a water hole can be found in a forest -- it is only necessary in the beginning; once a clear path has been worn to it, everyone will be able to find it without the sign.

Sixth, we should know when to leave aside any aspect of our meditation that is not clear. For this aspect, the similes given in the Visuddhimagga are more pertinent to meditating on the repulsive aspects of the body.

Seventh, we should understand that every part of our practice is important for fixing our attention (appana).

The last three points are based on the instructions given in three discourses in the Pali Canon. In the first discourse,[10] the Buddha tells the bhikkhus that it is important, when meditating, to keep concentration, effort, and equanimity in proper balance. If only concentration is developed, there will be a tendency to idleness. If there is too much effort, there will be a tendency to agitation. If equanimity is over emphasized, right concentration may not be attained. The Buddha compares this balancing with the way a goldsmith will heat crude gold and blow on it from time to time, sprinkle water on it from time to time, and examine it from time to time. If he overdoes any one of these, he will not properly prepare his gold.

The second discourse of the Buddha deals with attaining supreme coolness (i.e., Nibbana).[11] He says the meditator should be intent on six things: on restraining the mind when necessary, on exerting the mind when necessary, on gladdening the mind when necessary, on observing the mind with indifference when necessary, on the supreme [goal], and on delighting in Nibbana.

The third discourse by the Buddha[12] deals with knowing the right time to develop the Factors of Awakening. When the mind is sluggish, the factors of tranquility, concentration, and equanimity should not be developed. When the mind is sluggish, the factors of investigating mental states, energy, and rapture should be developed. When the mind is elated, the opposite is true. The factor of mindfulness can be developed at all times, however.

The Buddha's discourse to Ven. Rahula discussed above does not go into detail about the senses. In "The Shorter Exhortation," given to his son when Ven. Rahula was twenty-one, the Buddha instructs him in contemplation of the various aspects of the six senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and mental activity. This meditation subject was given because the Buddha realized that Ven. Rahula was mature in his understanding and ready for the highest attainment, Arahatsip.

The Buddha gives three things to be realized concerning every aspect of the senses: each aspect is impermanent (anicca), misery (dukkha), and must be considered as, "This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self" (in other words, anatta, no-self). The various aspects to be considered include the sense organ (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind), the object perceived by the sense organs (material forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible objects, mental objects), the types of consciousness arising from the coming together of the sense organ with an object, the associated mental consciousness, and the four mental aggregates that are the result of this, namely sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. When all this is understood correctly, it will lead to turning away, to being dispassionate, and to

freedom. Realizing that freedom has been attained will come at the highest stage of development, when the meditator knows, "Birth is destroyed; the holy life has been fulfilled; what should be done has been done; there is no future life after this."

Truth Will Triumph!

Sayagyi U Chit Tin

FOOTNOTES:

[1] The word 'group' has different meanings in this text. 1) Under the headings of the four physical elements the component parts of the body are grouped according to their predominant physical quality. E.g., hair, body hair etc. are in the earth group as their predominant quality is solidity. Under the heading of consciousness group the six types of consciousness based on the six sense organs are grouped. 2) The component parts of the body become groups themselves when they are seen as consisting of all four elements. E.g., though the hair is mainly hard, it also contains the characteristics of the other three elements. 3) The six types of consciousness become groups themselves when they are seen as consisting of the four mental aggregates. 4) Finally, all four physical elements are seen as one group and all the mental states are seen as one group.

[2] The texts in the Pali canon do not specifically mention the brain in this enumeration, but Ashin Buddhaghosa says it should be considered as included with bone marrow (//Path of Purification//, Chapter VIII, S 44).

[3] For example: Majjhima-nikaya, suttas no. 28 and no. 140 (//Middle Length Sayings// I 230-238, III 287-289).

[4] //The Path of Purification//, Chapter VIII, SS42-114; Chapter XI, SS27-117; Chapter XIV, SS37-57.

[5] Majjhima-nikaya sutta no. 62 (//Middle Length Sayings// II 91-97). Translated by Narada Thera and Bhikkhu Mahinda in //The Wheel//, no. 33, pp. 19-33 with information from the commentary in the notes.

[6] Majjhima-nikaya sutta no. 147 (//Middle Length Sayings// III 328-330). Translated by Nyanaponika Thera in The Wheel, no. 33, pp. 33-39 with information from the commentary in the notes.

[7] This is the contemplation of the decomposition of a corpse and is more appropriate for monks than for lay people.

[8] In this discourse, the Buddha includes the fifth element of space (akasa) in addition to the four elements of earth (//pathavi//), water (//apo//), fire (//tejo//), and wind (//vayo//).

[9] For meditating on the parts of the body, see //The Path of Purification//, Chapter VIII, SS42-144, in the second on "Mindfulness Occupied with the Body." For meditating on the four elements, see Chapter XI, SS27-117.

[10] Anguttara-nikaya I 256-258 (//Gradual Sayings// I 235f.).

[11] Anguttara-nikaya III 435 (//Gradual Sayings// III 304).

[12] Samyutta-nikaya V 113-115 (//Kindred Sayings// V 95ff.). Ashin Buddhaghosa mentions one sutta, but the instructions are in two suttas.

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Worldwide Contact Addresses  
in the Tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin  
~~~~~

- \*AUSTRIA\*: International Meditation Centre, A-9064 St. Michael/Gurk 6,  
Austria;Tel: +43 4224 2820, Fax: +43 4224 28204
  
- \*EASTERN AUSTRALIA\*: International Meditation Centre, Lot 2 Cessnock Road,  
Sunshine NSW 2264, Australia;  
Tel: +61 49 705 433, Fax: +61 49 705 749
  
- \*UNITED KINGDOM\*: International Meditation Centre, Splatts House,  
Heddington, Calne, Wiltshire SN11 OPE, England;  
Tel: +44 380 850 238, Fax: +44 380 850 833,  
Email: CIS, IMC-UK,100330,3304
  
- \*USA (East Coast)\*: International Meditation Centre, 438 Bankard Road,  
Westminster MD 21158, USA;  
Tel: +1 410 346 7889, Fax: +1 410 346 7133;  
Email: CIS, IMC-USA, 74163,2452
  
- \*WESTERN AUSTRALIA\*: International Meditation Centre, Lot 78 Jacoby  
Street, Mahogany Creek WA 6072, Australia;  
Tel: +61 9 295 2644, Fax: +61 9 295 3435
  
- \*CANADA\*: IMC-Canada, 336 Sandowne Drive, Waterloo, Ontario, N2K 1V8,  
Canada; Tel: +1 519 747 4762, Fax: +1 519 725 2781
  
- \*GERMANY\*: Sayagyi U Ba Khin Gesellschaft, Christaweg 16, 79114 Freiburg,  
Germany, Tel: +49 761 465 42, Fax: +49 761 465 92
  
- \*JAPAN\*: Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Trust, Komatsuri-Cho 923,  
Kishiwada-Shi, Osaka-Fu, 596 Japan, Tel: +81 724 45 0057
  
- \*THE NETHERLANDS\*: Sayagyi U Ba Khin Stichting, Oudegracht 124, 3511 AW  
Utrecht, The Netherlands,  
Tel: +31 30 311 445, Fax: +31 30 340 612
  
- \*SINGAPORE\*: Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Association, 9 Penang Road #07-12,  
Park Mall, Singapore 0923  
Tel: +65 338 6911, Fax: +65 336 7211
  
- \*SWITZERLAND\*: Sayagyi U Ba Khin Gesellschaft, Greyerzstrasse 35, 3013  
Bern, Switzerland;Tel: +41 31 415 233, Fax: +41 61 691 8049;  
Email: CIS, 100256,3576
  
- \*USA (West Coast)\*: IMC-USA, 77 Kensington Rd., San Anselmo, CA 94960.  
Tel: +1 415 459 3117, Fax: +1 415 346 7133
  
- \*BELGIUM\*: Address as for the Netherlands, Tel: +32 2414 1756

\*DENMARK\*: Contact Address: Mr. Peter Drost-Nissen, Strandboulevarden  
117, 3th, 2100 Kopenhagen, Denmark. Tel: 031 425 636

\*ITALY\*: Contact address: Mr. Renzo Fedele, Via Euganea 94, 35033  
Bresseo PD, Italy. Tel: +39 49 9900 752

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