Properties

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The Buddha has three main ways of analyzing our experience in terms of sense spheres, in terms of the aggregates, and in terms of the properties of dhatu. And of the three, the dhatu, or the elements, the properties, is the way that Westerners tend to overlook. It sounds like crude science, but we have a much more sophisticated understanding of elements. And so we tend to overlook the advantages that can come. We miss the advantages that can come if we learn how to look at our experience in this way. Part of the problem lies in translating these ideas as elements. I think properties is a better way of thinking about them. They basically refer to how you experience your body from inside, the different sensations that flow through the body. These are not sensory sensations. In other words, when the Buddha is talking about the body as a sense medium, he’s talking about the body as a recipient from contacts from outside, tactile sensations that come in via the skin or anything else that hits. But just the sense of having a body here, that’s called rupa, or form. And form is made up of these four properties—earth, water, wind, and fire. Earth refers to the solid sensations, water to the more liquid sensations, fire to the warmth, and wind to the energy. It’s ironic that we overlook the elements when we translate the word as elements, thinking that they’re crude. But they actually are a more precise vocabulary for describing our inner experience of the body than anything you have in English. If you simply sit here and notice where you feel the fact that you have a body, they’re these four properties, to the different parts. There’s going to be some warmth, there’s going to be a sense of liquidity and a sense of solidity, and then there’s going to be the energy that permeates the whole thing. These are very useful concepts to have, one, for learning how to make the sense of the body a comfortable place to stay. Breath is the primary means for this. It’s part of the wind element. But the wind element has other aspects as well, not just the in and out breath, but also the sense of energy flowing throughout the body. In the texts they say the energy that flows from the soles of the feet up to the top of the head, the energy that goes from the top of the head down to the soles of the feet, the energy in the stomach, the energy in the intestines. And the energy throughout the whole body, out to every pore. It’s the energy that you can use to make the body more comfortable. Think about the breath coming in and out, different parts of the body. Think of energy flow going through different parts of the body. This is useful for bringing things into balance. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha has us focus on the in and out breath. This is the most accessible to our intention. It’s one of the few processes that can be either automatic or willed. We’re going to try to will it here in as comfortable a way as possible. This requires that you pay a lot of attention. So in the beginning, just focus on wherever you do feel the breath, keeping in mind the idea that eventually you will become more sensitive to the breath flow in different parts of the body. Then it’s good to have that concept in the back of your mind. Otherwise you carry over old concepts you may have picked up when you were a child, thinking of the body as a big bellows. You have to pull the breath in, push the breath out, and that makes the breathing a lot more laborious. Whereas if you think of breath channels permitting the whole body, you find that things begin to loosen up. It’s almost automatic. The concept comes into the mind and the body will respond. All you have to do is think, “Relax, relax, relax,” and things open up and the breath flows better. When the breath flows better, things get more into balance and more comfortable. But this does take time to develop a sense of just right. Pay careful attention to what the body needs at any one point. This is why it’s good, once you’ve developed a comfortable sense of the in and out breath, to start examining the different parts of the body. Go through the body systematically, section by section, to see how the breathing process feels in detail in the different parts of the body. And you’ll find it makes the breathing a lot more comfortable. And you’ll notice that sometimes there’s a breath that’s hot, sometimes it’s cool. That’s the breath mixed with the heat element, or the liquid element, the fire element, or the liquid element. And sometimes it feels like the body gets really stiff. That’s when you’re focusing too much on the earth element. It’s a subconscious kind of thing. You may not consciously think you’re doing it, but you can find that you are. So if you feel that it gets really hard to breathe, you’re paying too much attention to the idea that the body is a solid. You try to hold in your mind the concept that it’s basically an energy field, and the solidity comes second to the energy. As you’re getting involved in this sense of the body from the inside, this is called being on the level of rupa, or form, which is a higher level of becoming. The kind of becoming that’s obsessed by sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations from outside. What comes from being with form is a higher level of pleasure. Without this pleasure you would not be able to overcome your attachment to sensual desire. The body needs pleasure. The mind needs pleasure. The body doesn’t need anything, but the mind needs pleasure if it’s going to function at all. And if you keep denying, denying, denying it, it’s going to look for its pleasure in strange ways. A lot of pleasure right here asks of which parts of the body feel most tense, deprived of energy. Or think of energy coming in, opening up those areas, relaxing them. It might be in the chest, it might be in the back, in the back of the neck, in the shoulders. Learn to explore this. Loosen things up. So it becomes a lot more pleasant experience. Being here with this sense of the body as you feel it from within. Analyzing the body in terms of the properties is also useful in terms of distinguishing pain from the body. Say you feel a pain in your hip or a pain in your knee. It’s all too easy to glue that sensation of pain to your sensation of the solid parts of the body. So if you’re doing vettana with rupa, feeling with form, then it becomes oppressive. The pain is there in your body. It’s invaded your body. And all you can think of is wanting to get rid of it, which is not the duty with regard to pain and stress, suffering and stress. That duty is to learn how to comprehend it. And so one of the ways of comprehending is learning how to see that it really is separate from earth, water, wind, and fire. These basic properties of the body as it’s felt from within are one kind of sensation, and the pains are a totally different kind of sensation. Try to see them as something separate. They’re there in the same place, but they’re on a different order of sensation. And then also notice the awareness which is aware of these things. This, too, is a property. In addition to the four properties, there’s the property of space and the property of consciousness. In the texts, they talk of space as being the areas inside the nose, inside the ears, in other words, the cavities of the body. But I found a much more useful way of perceiving it is the space between the atoms, and this goes throughout the whole body. And so it opens out into the sense of space around the body as well. And then there’s the awareness which is aware of all these things. That’s the sixth property. And so it’s useful to divide the physical properties from the property of consciousness and from the aggregate of feeling, particularly the pains that come in. Notice the pleasures. Learn how to see these things as distinct. Then you find that you don’t suffer as much from them. And so you find, as you’re working with the properties, you’re actually dealing with the aggregates, too. The properties here are primarily the aggregate of form. And then you’ve got the aggregate of consciousness. That’s that sixth property. As for the other aggregates, they’re the feelings that are either physical or mental, the perceptions that you hold in mind, like your perception of the breath and your fabrications. In this case, it would be the direct thought and evaluation that analyzes these things, looks at them, turns them over. So all these things are coming into play. It may seem like a foreign way of looking at your experience, at least it gives you a vocabulary for looking at your experience from within. Something that here in the West we tend to be pretty impoverished in. So it’s a good use of concepts to pick up and learn how to get a feel for them. It takes a while. Then you begin to notice, “Oh, this particular sensation, that’s what they’re talking about when they say ‘earth element,’ this kind of sensation is what they’re talking about when they’re saying ‘water property’ or ‘liquid property,’ and so on down the line.” And you learn to play with these things. It’s not just looking at them and analyzing them. You learn how to manipulate them. This is an important part of developing any kind of comprehension of cause and effect. Say that you breathe in. Do you have a tendency to think when you’re breathing in, “Is the energy being pulled up, or is the energy being forced down, or allowed to go down, allowed to go up?” In other words, does it go up or does it go down? And if you were to sit here with the energy going up for a long time, what would happen? The Zen master Hakuin talked about what he called “Zen sickness.” Looking at the symptoms he was complaining of, it looks like he was pulling the energy up as he was breathing in. Sometimes it feels invigorating, but if you get too much, it becomes disorienting. You can tend to get headaches. Once you find that happening in meditation, we’ll think of the breath energy going down. You don’t have to suck it up. You just allow it to spread down. And vice versa. If you find that the energy is going down, it’s making you sleepy, we’ll think of it coming up as you breathe in. There’s a lot to play with here. And as you play with it, you get a better sense of cause and effect, and you begin to see your own perceptions and thought fabrications in action. This is how you develop tranquility and insight at the same time. There’s no place in the canon where the Buddha says, “Just do insight practice.” In fact, the times he sends the monks off to do meditation, he always says, “Go do jhana.” And if you look at your practice and you find that you’re leaning more towards the tranquility side, he’d say, “Okay, try to develop insight.” If you’re leaning more towards the analytical side, he would say, “Go back and practice tranquility.” In other words, bring things into balance. These qualities have to be developed together, in tandem, in order to do their work. And so you’ll find as you work with the properties, you’re making it more pleasant for the mind to settle down, easier for it to settle down, you develop a sense of interest in what you’re doing. And you develop the kind of concentration that comes with an element of discernment that can bring these things into balance. Because the mind is perfectly poised in a position of balance, that’s when things open up. You can’t take nirvana by storm. If we could do that, everybody would have gone there a long time ago. It’s a lot more subtle and requires a lot more sensitivity to what you’re doing right now, how you can get the mind to settle down, how you can be clear about what you’re doing, how you see cause and effect as you’re getting the mind to settle down. It all comes together. So try to get a sense of how to use these concepts. Particularly how to use them as a means of getting the mind to settle down with a sense of stability and ease. Because it’s in the process of mastering concentration that a lot of insight comes. And there are a lot of tools for doing just that.

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