

The Six Properties

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In English we have a very limited vocabulary for describing how the body feels from the inside. We feel “tingly” or we feel “heavy.” We have ants crawling on our skin or butterflies in our stomachs. There are not that many words, and nothing really systematic. This is where the Buddha’s teaching on the properties is helpful. They give a systematic way of categorizing the feelings you have in the body—how it feels from the inside—along with a sense of what you can do with those feelings. They also give you a very clear sense of how much your present input shapes the way that you experience the body, and an immediate, very visceral way of using that present input to balance things out, to make the body an easier place in which to settle down.

The basic system of properties is six: earth, water, air, fire, space, and consciousness. It sounds like medieval chemistry. We’d do better though, to look at these as qualities you notice when you’re looking at how the body feels from the inside, categorizing the sensations. There are sensations of heaviness, that would be *earth*, heaviness or solidity; *water* would be cool sensations; *fire* is of course warm; *wind* is the motion back and forth; *space* is the feelings of emptiness; and *consciousness* is the property that’s aware of all these things.

The theory of these properties is that they get provoked. In other words, as they get emphasized, as some incident strengthens them or kicks them into action, they get stronger and stronger. In the texts they talk about external properties getting provoked. Floods come from the provocation of the water property; huge fires or intense heat, from the provocation of the fire property; huge winds, from the provocation of the wind property. Interestingly they also attributed earthquakes to the wind property. This means that wind refers not only to the wind in the air, but also to the motion down in the earth. Apparently earth was the only property that wasn’t provokable, on the external level at least, but it would move when the wind property got into the act.

Whatever we may think of these concepts as ways of describing external events, they’re a very useful way of looking at internal events, at the sensation of the body from within. Classically, the internal properties are used to explain disease. Giddiness or lightheadedness is a sign of too much wind property, a sign that the wind property has been provoked. With fever, of course, the fire property has been provoked. A feeling of lethargy or heaviness in your limbs is a sign of too much earth property.

These are things you can play with in your meditation. That’s where the teaching really becomes useful, because it allows you to see how much the way you focus on the body has an impact on how you perceive the body, how you actually sense the body. We think of sensations as being primary, the raw material, the basic building blocks of experience, but there are conscious decisions being made that precede the sensations. Look at the teaching on

dependent origination. *Sankhara*, or “fabrication” is way down there, prior to the sensations you feel in terms of form, feeling, and so forth.

So, how are you going to fabricate the body? If there are feelings of tension in the body, sometimes that’s a sign of too much earth property. So you can think of the breath. This is one of the reasons we start with the breath. It’s the property that’s most easily manipulated and the one that most directly works through tension. Wherever there’s a sense of tension, focus on it and see if you can get a sense of gentle, healing motion going through it. The potential for motion is there, simply that the perception that contributed to the tension has blocked it. So you can consciously decide that you’re going to perceive motion there. Give it a chance to happen, and the potential for motion, the potential for movement through that part of the nervous system, will get strengthened, will get aroused, which may be a better way of translating the word that I just translated as provoked. It gets aroused. The breath, you find, can move through that sense of blockage.

When you’re feeling giddy or manic, you can think of the earth property to settle things down. If there’s just too much frenetic energy in the body, you can think of your bones being made of iron, of your hands and feet weighing a ton. Wherever you have a sense of solidity in the body, focus on that and try to magnify it. You find that your choice of the image you’re using, your purpose in choosing it, will really affect the way you start sensing that part of the body. Then you can take that sensation and spread it out, connecting it with other sensations of solidity in the body. The potential for solidity is always there.

When you’re feeling depressed and weighed down, think of lighter sensations, of the breath giving a lift to the different parts of the body. When you’re hot, think of the water property. Focus on whatever sensations in the body are cooler than the others, really keep your focus right there, and think “water, water” or “cool, cool.” You’ll find that all of a sudden other cool sensations in the body will appear to your awareness. The potential for them was waiting, simply that they needed the element of present intention to highlight them.

Again, when you’re feeling cold, focus in on warmth. There will be some part of the body that’s warmer than the others, so focus in on it. Then think of the warmth staying there and spreading to other parts of the body where other warm sensations will get aroused.

You can do this at any stage in the concentration, although it’s most effective when the breath is still. At that point the body feels like a cloud of mist, little points of sensation, and each little sensation has the potential to be any one of these four properties. When your sense of the body is reduced to what the French would call pointillism, it’s a lot easier, simply with a thought, to emphasize either the heaviness or the lightness, the movement, the warmth or the coolness of those sensations, the *sensation-potentials* you’ve got there.

This way you accomplish two things at once. On the one hand you balance out the body. Whenever one type of sensation feels too oppressive, you can think of the opposing sensation to balance it out. On the other, you start seeing the role of present intention in your awareness, in your experience of the present moment in a very visceral way. When things grow very still and very balanced in

terms of those four properties, with this mist of potential sensations that can go in any direction, what you can also do is focus on the space between the points. Realize that the space is boundless. It goes through the body and out in all directions. Just think that, "infinite space." Stay with the sensation of infinite space that comes along with the perception. The potential for it is always there; it's simply that the perception arouses it.

It's a very pleasant state to get in. Things seem a lot less solid, a lot less oppressive. You don't feel so trapped in the body. My teacher had a student, an old woman who was practicing meditation with him at the point when he was getting ready to leave Wat Asokaram. After he had left, she had to practice on her own for quite a while. There was one evening when she was sitting meditating with the group when a voice came to her and said, "You're going to die tonight."

She was a little taken aback, but then she reminded herself, "Well, if I'm going to die, the best way to die is meditating." So she just sat there and watched to see what would happen as the body dies, to see what it would be like. There was an actual sensation of the body beginning to fall apart. "All of the various properties were going their separate ways", she said, "like a house on fire. There was no place in the body that you could focus your awareness and have any sense of comfort at all." So for a moment she felt lost, but then she remembered, "Well, there's the space property." So she focused in on the space property and all that sense of the house on fire suddenly disappeared and there was a very strong sense of infinite space. There was always the potential to go back to the body. (This is something you'll notice when you're at this point in your meditation: there are the spots that could provide a potential for the form of the body but you chose not to focus on them. Instead you focus on the sense of space in between and all around. There's a sense of boundlessness that goes with it.)

When she came out of meditation, of course, she hadn't died. She was still alive. But she had learned an important lesson, that when things get really bad in the body you can always go to space. Even though it's not awakening, and it's not the unconditioned, it's a lot better than being in a lot of turmoil along with the properties in the body.

So, the properties provide a useful way of looking at the potentials in the present moment. They also make it easier to get to that sense of *awareness itself* that you read about so much in the writings of the Thai Ajaans. Once you're with infinite space, drop the perception of "space" and see what's left. There will just be a perception of *knowing, knowing, knowing*, which takes its place. You don't have to ask, "Knowing what?" There's just *knowing, awareness, knowing, knowing*.

Once you've got everything divided up into properties like this, then you've got the raw materials for gaining insight. The terms of analysis may initially seem strange, but once you get a visceral sense of what they're referring to, you find they're extremely useful. They not only give the mind a good place to settle down in the stillness of concentration, but they also help you gain insight into the way perception shapes your experience of the body, shapes your perception of what's going on here in the present moment, seeing how fabricated that all is.

You've got potentials coming in from past karma, but you've also got the element of present choice, which becomes extremely clear when you analyze things in this way.

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, he had me memorize Ajaan Lee's *Divine Mantra*: six passages dealing with the different properties. For a long time it seemed very foreign to me until one night I was chanting the passage on the property of consciousness and I realized that it was referring to the awareness that's right here. *This awareness. Right here.* When this realization hit, it was as if a huge iceberg in my heart suddenly melted. I wasn't dealing with some outside, foreign frame of thinking; instead, it was something extremely direct, immediate, right here and now. It was then that I began to get a sense of why Ajaan Fuang had asked me to memorize the chant, why he wanted all of his students to think about their present experience in these terms.

So, keep this mode of analysis in mind. Try to get some sense of it as you put it to use, and you'll find that it's extremely useful in the practice. As with all of the Buddha's teachings, the importance of the teaching is what you do with it, and what it does for you in helping to gain insight into how stress and suffering are created in the present moment and how you don't have to create them, if you pay attention, if you work at these skills.