Today’s talk will be on the

The Four Elements in Buddhism*

Presented by Anagarika Tevijjo

What we may call speculative thought/ upon the four basic elements:

of earth, air, fire and water,

was present/ in the Eastern Vedic tradition from the earliest times/ of recordable memory,

and/ particularly/
in the Buddhist traditions/
of India,/ Tibet,/ and South East Asia,

long before/ they ever reached/
an ancient Greece
and took their place/
in the School/ of Pre-Socratic philosophy within the Western/ philosophical tradition.

*

In early speculative thought, we also hear the terms:
earth, air, fire and water
in connection with infinite space

- infinite space becoming symbolical -

of a higher level of light and energy for which there is no speakable-name.

*

Actually, in the world, today, a philosophy which is based
on earth, air, fire and water
as the four basic elements of being

sounds quite silly
and simplistic,
doesn’t it?

*  

But there is more to it than just that:-

The formula is/ an allegorical/ representation:
standing for the changing states/ and cycles/
- of all elements/ in the universe -
dependent/ on cause and effect processes.

*  

The First Element,

Earth, actually, symbolizes/

the process of change/
with the characteristics/
of extension/, 
solidity/ or rigidity,
in the nature of matter, 

- in which 
nothing is ever in a

fixed/, rigid/ or permanent state -
but ever in the process/ of altering/ and changing its form 
as it is forever being recycled/ within the process of universe.

Moreover/, without the earth- element/ of solidity -
nothing could occupy space.

There would be no solid matter-
only invisible/ impulses/
of energy/ in empty space.

And this, is likely/
one of the ancient mysteries,
which has been couched in allegorical language.)

*

**The Second Element,**

**Water,** in its turn, means the quality of **liquidity** and cohesion plus fluidity, malleability, adaptability or pliability.

Moreover, water coheres and flows around solid objects and clings to them, mirroring their form.

And it is this water element which makes different particles of matter cohere, preventing them from being erratically scattered about.

Both fluidity and contraction are properties of the water element.

*

**The Third Element,**

**Air,** which we associate with **wind,** allegorically means vibration and fluctuation and ultimately all motion, oscillation, pulsation
and pressure
are caused by this element -

(sometimes called/ the mobile element).

*

The Fourth Element,

Fire translates/ as heat or energy/

which may perhaps be
better expressed as ‘combustion.’

Both heat and cold/ are its properties

which are ever-constantly changing.

*

Fire as heat/ as a result/
has the property
of causing motion
due to the dynamic/ effects of energy
upon and within/ the other elements.

Hence/, it is dependent upon energy/
that all relative motions/
and changes
within all combinations/
of elements/ occurs.

*

We must also note that

matter (earth)
gas (air),
heat (fire), and
liquid (water),

are always present/ in various proportions-
in any elemental state,

and further:-

in each and every/ elemental state,  
**one of the primal elements**  
**will always predominate**  
in relative relationship/ to the others.

*  

**And** we must further note that -

the proportional relationships/
are always changing
relative to temperature

- [the fiery element] –

in relation to/ innumerable/ other/
relative factors/ and conditions.

*  

By ‘**relative proportions/**’
we mean/, for example,
that a sandy beach/ is solid to walk on/
because/ of the predominance/ of the earth element,
but - add enough water - and it becomes quicksand
in which/ the watery element/ predominates.

**And**

This stands true/ to relative proportions/
for **all combinations** of
solid/, gaseous, heat / and fluid / states of matter.

So that, for example,

Water/ deprived of heat/ turns into ice.
Similarly, water under great pressure (say in a fire-hose) also behaves like a solid,
as does compressed-air in an approaching cyclone.

In each case, the four elements are present in different proportions.

* *

And this is the stuff of the study of science and not just some arcane, nonsense out of old books by dead people.

* *

Even the table of chemical elements, (when broken down into its primal units), leaves us with these **four basic elements**.

Aside:

[Which, incidentally, is how the ancient and medieval interest in **alchemy** originated.]

**Next**, in our discussion we come to

- **The Space Element** -

And it is highly interesting to note that in Buddhist contemplation there are forty concentration objects,
ten of which are earth, air, fire, and water, plus the four colors blue, yellow, red and white, plus space and light,

[the twenty-four other meditation objects* are not directly relevant to our discussion here.]
What is directly relevant is that ultimately, through penetrating-concentration, even what the mind/body originally cognizes as being the four basic elements can be further broken down and analyzed into refractable movements of particles and colors within energy-vibrations in space.

And, in summary; What this means is that - in the end - there is no ultimate solidity or permanency in anything.

(repeat)

To summarize and reiterate what at first may sound confusing:- there are two stages to our allegorical representation of reality:

I. The first level is one of seeming solidity, liquidity, heat-energy and gaseous matter which appears to have independent, objective and even concrete existence within the universe, but when broken-down more-closely,

II. On a second level,
(in actuality),
the basic elements
have no fixed reality
and may be analyzed:

as mere/ miniscule particles/ or units/
of combustible impulses/ of energy

which are ever-changing/ and moving/
through a continuum of cycles/
and processes/

(within the universe)-

in which/ the elements/
are ever-interdependently-
being determined/
by continually-changing/
conditions/ and factors

and,

[when the elements/
cease to be in motion,

due to/ a lack of
changing forms
of elemental energy-/
within the process of /
relative relations/
and interactions,]

then,

a composite body begins to
break-down into its original units
and everything/ therein/ then/ deteriorates/, (as the ultimate, infinitesimal,
primary energy units lose cohesion),
(and all things fall apart)

moving back into
the natural cycle of the elements.

*

In other words, the fiery units of energy - vibrating/ within the elements/ eventually, go back into/ and carry on/ within the continuum/ of the broad/, vast/, and wholly un-fathomable/ universe-

into a realm/ which is totally lacking matter and solidity and which is/, ultimately/, akin to what we figuratively call/ infinite space and light.

*

In summary,

This connects the cohesion of elements and their subsequent /separation) into vibrations of energy in what may well have been one of the ancient mysteries-

regarding insight/ into the ultimate nature/ of arising and ceasing/ of dissolution and ultimate death

within the realm of space and light and Ultimate Truth which lies/ beyond/ the objectively-visible/ and fathomable.
[Thus ends this Lecture]

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*Footnote: The above article follows the structural-outline of “The Elements in Buddhism” by Tony Albracht, (researched in Theravada and Tibetan sources) until we reach the references to “meditation,” following which the present writer’s wording has been influenced by reading “The Maha Bhuta” - “The Great Elements” as translated by Ledi Sayadaw from the original Pali document into English. Both texts are saying the same thing but the former is modern while the latter is an ancient.

Some Discussion topics:

1. There are three levels of reality:
   the **concrete** --that which is what it is objectively-experienced
   the **symbolic** –that which is what it is but means something more
   the **esoteric** – that which is-
       beyond rational symbolic language and
       beyond communicable understanding

2. Meditation masters would say
   that ultimate reality can only be known through direct experience,
   insight
   wisdom

   So what does this imply about you and
   your own sense of self and solidity?

   And what could this have to do with determining
   the form and the force
   with which you burn energy
   in your moral practice?