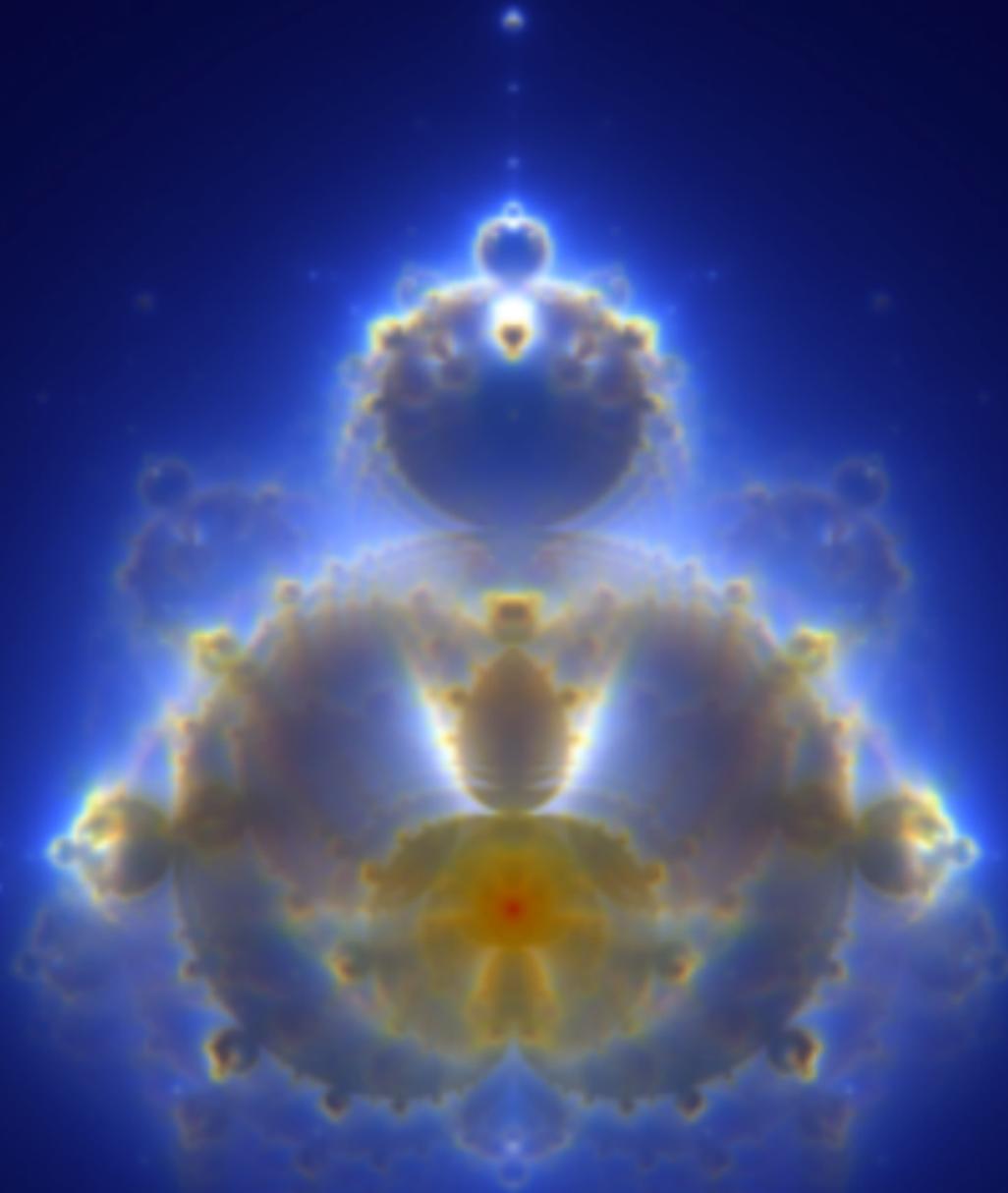


# Purifying the 5 Elements

Techniques for observing and changing negative patterns



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## **The Five Elements**

In ancient times, philosophers believed that the world was composed of Five Elements; Air, Fire, Earth, Water and Space. A physicist would call them motion, gravity, light, spin and the vacuum. A biologist could see them in nerve function, enzymes, growth, hormones and gene silencing. In the animal kingdom, we see them as flight, fight, hoarding, sex and sleep. Let's look at how we as humans experience them.

### **Air**

Air is the Element of movement. We can experience an excess of the Air Element as fear, anxiety, rushing or compulsion. A deficiency of the Air Element can create inertia or boredom. A healthy Air Element gives you the energy to start things, curiosity and lightheartedness.

### **Fire**

Fire is the Element of destruction. We can experience an excess of the Fire Element as anger, violence, impatience, and criticism. A deficiency of the Fire Element can create poor boundaries, cowardice and low self esteem. A healthy Fire Element is gives confidence and logical reasoning (by destroying falsehoods).

### **Earth**

Earth is the Element of Form. An excess of the Earth Element creates attachment to things and outcomes. We can experience an excess of the Earth element as jealousy, stubbornness or possessiveness. A deficiency of the Earth Element can create a unreliability. When healthy, the Earth Element can be experienced as groundedness.

## **Water**

Water is the Element of Dreaming. We can experience an excess of the Water Element as sadness and deception (of self and others). A deficiency of the Water Element can be experienced as the inability to feel pleasure. When healthy, the Water Element is experienced as a flow, creativity and sensuality.

## **Space**

Space is the Element of Perspective. We can experience an excess of the Space Element as apathy and numbness, an existential crisis. “Why am I here? This is all so meaningless...” A deficiency of the Space Element can create a sense of being overwhelmed. When healthy, the Space Element is experienced as the wisdom of being in the world, but not of it.

## **Purifying the 5 Elements**

Healthy expressions of the 5 Elements requires that we:

- 1- Learn the qualities of each of the 5 Elements.
- 2- Discover which Elements we have in excess, which we have in deficiency.
- 3- Upgrade our mind’s narrative responses to our elemental imbalances.
- 4- Avoid the subtle traps that can create and maintain Elemental imbalances.
- 5- Cultivating Mastery of the Elements

## **Imbalances between the Elements**

We have already discussed the different qualities of the 5 Elements. Now we must examine our personalities and determine which we may have in excess or deficiency. Let's take a look at a few examples:

Excessive Earth and deficient Air creates a workaholic who doesn't take the time to play.

Excessive Earth and deficient Fire creates a person that follows orders but does not know how to lead.

Excessive Fire and deficient Water makes a person logical but out of touch with their intuitive side.

Excessive Water and deficient Air creates a person that is successful at seduction but not with friendship.

Excessive Water and deficient Earth creates a dreamer that rarely gets things accomplished.

Excessive Water and deficient Fire creates a person that is very creative and intuitive, but lacks the logic to know the difference between intuition and fantasy.

and so on...

So, go through the 5 Elements, look back at your life and determine what your personal balance is.

## Upgrading your Narratives

Understanding your personal imbalances required that you take inventory of your entire life up to this point. The next step happens in live time. We must now observe our thoughts in the moment. We must discover our 'narrative habits'.

Every thought creates a neural path. The more we use a pathway, the more myelin (nerve insulation) we lay down and the faster and more efficient that path becomes. This is how we learn. On the other hand, neural pathways we don't use lose their myelin and break down. This is called neural or synaptic pruning.

Another name for a highly myelinated path is a habit. It's estimated to take 500 repetitions to learn a new habit (myelinate a pathway), but 5,000 to change a bad habit (synaptic pruning/demyelination). Thus we must be very mindful of the habits we create.

When you talk to yourself, you will likely find that you use words that are associated with your dominant negative Elements. I call this self talk the 'narrative'. The first step in rewiring your brain was to recognize the imbalance. We are now at the second step, upgrading the narrative.

Upgrading narratives is a gradual process. Changing brain architecture takes time and persistence. To be effective and sustainable, change must be authentic. That means, we can only rewire ourselves at a speed that our brain can handle.

Change must be large enough to be useful, but small enough to be sustainable. One way to change our narratives is to change our language choices. People that indulge in their negative narratives only further reinforce their destructive habits and add more myelin to their dysfunctional neural pathways.

On the other hand, the person who, when angry, repeats over and over “Serenity now, serenity now” is not being authentic. It is not genuine for them to feel serene if they were just feeling angry. It is a fantasy. People who suppress their emotions only push them deeper into their subconscious which is counter productive, since we can only change habits that we are consciously aware of. So, if we should neither indulge nor suppress, what should we do?

The brain can change (has plasticity). If we are conscious (do not suppress), disciplined (do not indulge) and move at a pace that our brains can keep up with (are authentic), we can replace dysfunctional neural pathways (habits) with better ones of our choosing.

One way to do this is to change our linguistic choices. Here are some examples of how to authentically upgrade narratives from a Five Element perspective.

Air: If there is a situation that you are afraid of, consider reframing the experience as something that you are concerned about instead.

Fire: If there is a situation that you are angry about, consider reframing the experience as something that is inconvenient instead.

Earth: If there is something that you are very attached to, consider reframing the experience as having a preference instead.

Water: If there is a situation where you feel depressed, consider reframing the experience as one that is disappointing instead.

Space: If there is a situation where you feel apathetic or numb, consider reframing the experience as one in which you are feeling a bit detached instead.

The key is to find a word or phrase that represents a state that is less negative than the narrative your mind is giving you. If you make it only slightly less negative, this process may take a long time. If on the other hand you overly minimize the negative emotion, then it won't be authentic or sustainable. Find a balance. These are the words that work for me. If they aren't authentic for you, find words that are.

Each of these emotional states are each associated with specific neurotransmitter levels and electrical activity in different parts of the brain. Adrenaline gives us fear, cortisol anger etc...

As such, it is helpful to remember that neurotransmitters and activity in different brain regions is cyclical. If you are in the middle of a challenging Element, remember this, wait 20 minutes and the peak of it will likely pass.

### **Three invitations**

Our mind is always inviting us to accept its narratives. I call the mind's narrations The first invitation. By authentically changing your narrative, you decline the first invitation.

The more you can observe your own narrative, the more you will notice narratives in other people. Remember, not only does your mind invite you to a narrative, the same happens for everyone else as well.

This then is the second invitation. If someone is telling you about how scary, unjust, lacking, sad or meaningless their world is, they are inviting you into their narrative. You are free to decline their narrative as well.

The third invitation is where you help upgrade narratives for other people. It is an invitation you offer others for their benefit. It is up to you to decide if you want to explain what you are doing or simply do it.

### **Some examples of invitations**

Them: "I'm really scared about X"  
You: "Ah, so you're concerned about X?"  
Them: "Yeah, I'm concerned"  
You: "Yeah, that's definitely a situation to be mindful of. Anything I can do to help?"

Them: "I'm really angry about Y"  
You: "Ah, that's very inconvenient"  
Them: "It's not inconvenient! It's an outrage! Don't minimize it"  
You: "Yes, but how powerful does it make you if you can reframe it as an inconvenience?"  
Them: "Oh, I see what you mean. Well then, It's darn inconvenient!"  
You: "Yes, darn inconvenient. None of us is perfect."

It takes skill to be able to help a person turn their dials (adjust their Elements) without pushing their buttons (triggering their defenses).

### **Subtle traps of the elements**

One can see a fixation on one Element or another in many Spiritual traditions. While fixations will generate interesting extreme experiences, they are not sustainable. In time, the practitioner will pendulum to the other side to bring themselves back into balance. I call these fixations, subtle traps.

### **Three Air traps**

The first Air trap is psychological in nature. It is the unintended consequence of the 'Quest'. Some spiritual seekers spend years searching for hidden truths. Truth will be found in this book, or that teacher, or this meditation practice or that mystery school. Always searching is an Air Element imbalance. Searching by definition means one is not present with what is here and now, always looking for something else. The first Air trap is... not being present.

This leads us to the second Air trap. Why can't the search end with the discovery of Truth for the seeker? It is because simple truths are unsustainable. When an Element is out of balance, moving towards balance feels like the discovery of 'Truth'. It is the 'ah-ha' moment. In time however, the practice of that truth that once moved us towards balance now overshoots the mark and now takes us out of balance. The 'ah-ha' feeling disappears and is replaced with a sense of something being wrong. That something of course is the Element, now pushed in the opposite direction, and imbalanced yet again.

A third Air Element trap has to do with energy cultivation. Chi Gong and Kundalini Yoga are examples of this. While there are many amazing experiences that Air cultivation can stimulate, it is not without risk. If we were ready, Air (Qi) would flow through our subtle system automatically. Forcing their activation before we are ready can damage both the body and the mind.

When great meditators described energy moving in their bodies and chakras, they considered it an interesting side effect but ultimately a distraction from their true goal. Their students, reading their master's accounts, believed that these 'side effects' were techniques to be practiced or the goals themselves and thus created Air Cultivation techniques and schools. The true meaning of the teachings were thus lost.

## **Fire traps**

One Fire trap is to become fixated on discipline. Austerities like enduring great bodily discomfort are not sustainable and will only create disharmony. While discipline is needed in any path, it is not the path itself.

## **The Earth trap**

The human brain is constantly bombarded by data. The eyes alone process 10 million bits of data per second. To handle this, the brain is very efficient at ignoring repetitive data. This has the unintended consequence of making us ungrateful. If we are lucky enough to be well fed, healthy, have a roof over our heads, have friends and family, our brains will ignore it as 'repetitive data'.

The Earth Trap is to become focused on the world of form. While some physical things (food, shelter, savings...) are needed, beyond a certain amount, they do not create happiness, and we can become possessed by our possessions.

However, being a monk in the street with only a robe and begging bowl is just as unsustainable as being a materialist. Both are trapped in an Earth Element imbalance, just in opposite ways.

## **The Water trap**

Some schools cultivate imagination as a way to activate the energy body. Imagination is the Water Element. Water opposes Fire and if you over-cultivate Water, then Fire (reason and intellect) can become suppressed. This can lead to getting lost in a world of fantasy.

## **The Space trap**

When we upgrade our narratives, what we are actually doing is temporarily increasing the Space Element. This gives us the 'space' necessary to step back and see the excessive element and how it is affecting us and how to upgrade our narrative of it, but remember too much can make us apathetic.

Detaching from the Elements is only useful in that it gives us some time and perspective to become less reactive in the moment. Spending years sitting in a cave and meditating is not Mastery, it is escapism and is not sustainable.

### **False mastery of an Element**

Excesses of Air, Fire, Earth, Water and Space yield respectively: fear, anger, greed, depression and apathy. What about deficiencies of the Elements?

Another trap is to confuse a deficient Element for one we think we have mastered. I call this False Mastery. Here are some examples of these deficiency traps as well as ways to increase deficient Elements.

If a person is deficient in Air, it will be very easy for them to be 'still' which may look like mastery of the Air Element. Such a person will have difficulty starting projects. What this person really needs is more Air energy. One way to do this is to add more play to your life.

If a person is deficient in Fire, they may seem calm and cooperative, which may look like Mastery of the Fire Element. They may think, "Ah, I am so evolved, I don't get angry." Such a person would get taken advantage of. What they really need is more Fire energy. Some ways to do this is include the practice of martial arts and taking cold showers (raises testosterone).

If a person is deficient in Earth, it will be very easy for them to be non-materialistic, which may look like Mastery of the Earth Element. Such a person has no goals, no preferences and accomplishes little in life. What they need is more Earth energy. One way to do this is to follow through to the end on long projects.

If a person is deficient in Water, it will be very easy for them to be ascetic and deny themselves pleasure, which may look like Mastery of the Water Element. Such a person does not not enjoy their life. What they really need is more Water energy. To increase the Water Element, find something to immerse yourself and get lost in. Music, dance, lovemaking...

If a person is deficient in Space, it will be very easy for them to be involved in the world which may look like the final mastery of all the Elements (compassionate action). Such a person has no detachment. What they really need is more Space energy. Classical emptiness meditation is useful here.

## **Towards a sustainable philosophy**

We begin our journey with the Elements by first understanding and recognizing their energetic signatures and activities in our lives. As we continue we notice that in our personality, there are patterns. Some Elements are consistently excessive, some are deficient. For the excessive Elements, we learn how to upgrade our narratives. For the deficient Elements, we learn to increase them with certain practices.

Then come the subtle traps of false mastery. Practices and beliefs that bring us out of balance. These are unsustainable

paths. They are not authentic. So, how do we find a sustainable philosophy? A way of living in balance with the Elements?

Whereas authenticity is how we test if our linguistic upgrades are well crafted, sustainability is how we test if our philosophy is in balance with the Elements.

So, consider your path. The truths you have come to. The beliefs that you live by. Are they in balance? Are they sustainable? Could you continue them for all time?

To purify the Elements we must work on both their quantity and quality. We must have the right amounts of each in our lives as well as work on their more positive manifestations. The Elements are not here for us to escape, since escaping them only creates another Element (Space). The Elements are energies that pass through us and move around us. Learn to recognize them in and around you. Learn to manifest them in their more noble forms. Once you become conscious of them, your world will never be the same.

### **Positive versions of the Elements**

Once we have authentically upgraded the Elements, we can go further. We can move into the positive forms of the Elements.

Air becomes faith  
Fire becomes courage  
Earth becomes strength  
Water becomes flow  
Space becomes compassion

By cultivating these positive attributes, we continue our journey of self discovery and evolution. If you enjoyed this work, I invite you to read the final book in this series 'Graduating Earth'.