

Coming down to earth.

It helps me see to through the delusion of a separate, isolated self when I let go of thinking and instead notice how experience can be felt in terms of the five elements: earth, water, fire, air and space. This provides an exploration of life which is not so easily clouded by my opinions and prejudices. Ironically, this more immediate encounter with the world is showing me unacknowledged prejudices and testing my most cherished opinions! It's a gateway to truth.

Earth is perhaps the easiest element to notice. Right now I can feel my feet pressing into the ground and the hardness of the table that my elbow leans on. Sometimes I am more aware of the earth element within myself – heaviness becomes very obvious as I race up the steps at Connolly Station, and (especially if I miss the train) tension in my jaw!

But my relationship with the earth element began badly. As part of a therapy program (the 'Back to Beginning's' program offered by Tara Rokpa – see www.tararokpa.org and the book "Restoring the Balance" by Dr. Akong Tulku Rinpoche) some years ago, we were asked to spend a month exploring each of the five elements, starting with the earth. We were encouraged not only to feel heaviness, touching etc, but also to immerse ourselves in the physical earth e.g. gardening, hill-walking or literally mucking about! Although I could feel my feet touching the ground, I found I didn't much like to be cognitively aware of the ground beneath my feet – even quite beautiful parkland. It seemed somehow alien, even threatening, and I found myself dismissing it quickly as 'beneath me'. Once I was running along some open ground and, despite being tired, found I preferred the uphill struggles to the downhill stretches! I enjoyed the mental energies generated by the uphill challenge e.g. a sense of power, determination, anticipation of the summit. The easy run downhill called only for relaxation, promised nothing. It felt like loss.

As I began to acknowledge my relationship with the physical earth I saw my preference for the mental world and my disdain for more concrete reality. As always, acknowledgement heralds change, and I am slowly coming down to earth! As I let go of clinging to opinions and dreams and ideals, and feel my way through the fear and sadness of their loss, I find it easier to relax physically, trusting the earth to support me instead. I am more and more willing to explore that within me which is devoid of ideas, and I'm beginning to appreciate the peaceful experience of non-opinionated flesh! The links between mind and body become more fascinating e.g. if I get a fright I can feel a wall of tension solidifying in my jaw, as my mind pushes away from the body saying 'No, not this, no, no, no!'. And then I feel waves of sourness chipping away at the wall as I acknowledge my aversion. Eventually I sense the quiet joy of acceptance as I relax and let the wall crumble. In meditation there is the whisper that the softness of relaxing flesh might be an experience of truth more trustworthy than all my heady visions. I begin to appreciate the Buddha's words: "*Within the fathom long body can the entire universe be known*".