

AIR

(Source: [Luminous Emptiness](#))

The fourth great element can be called either air or wind. Its characteristic is movement. Wind is simply moving air, which is inhaled and exhaled by living beings as breath. Air is constantly in motion, although when it is relatively still, we barely perceive its presence. Perhaps we may feel the very slight stir of a breeze against our skin or the clammy weight of the atmosphere on a humid day. When it moves more violently, although it is invisible in itself, we can see its effects as it rushes through trees and grass or whips up the surface of water, and we can hear the sounds it causes as it howls around buildings, making things whistle, groan, creak, and bang. We can feel the tug of a kite on its string as it tosses in gusts of wind, and we can watch birds soaring through the sky on thermal currents. On a windy day, we feel the presence of air around our bodies as we either struggle against it or are pushed along by its force against our backs.

The subtle quality of air gives birth to the sense of touch or feeling, and to the sensations that are felt. Air is less material than earth, water, or even fire, so it is less perceptible to the physical senses. It has no taste; we cannot see or hear it, only the effects it causes; we can smell the scents carried on the wind, not the wind itself. But we can feel its movement against our skin; touch is the only direct sensory experience we have of air.

Air is the breath of life to living things. A seed in the earth or an embryo in the womb, after having been nourished by liquid and invigorated by warmth, must eventually emerge into the air and start to thrive independently. It is the mobile quality of air that makes growth and development possible from the very start of life, since growth itself is movement and expansion.

We can most fully appreciate the importance of air by becoming aware of our breathing. When we are out of breath, suffocating and gasping, we gulp in great mouthfuls of air as though it were a lifegiving drink. When we are calm and peaceful, breathing very gently, we can feel the slight movement of breath in and out of the nostrils, alternately cool and warm, and become intuitively aware that it is indeed the breath of life. The close connection between breath and emotion has long been recognized: we are often advised to take a deep breath before acting impulsively and to breathe slowly and deeply when we feel frightened or aggressive.

Breath is a direct link to the external world. When we experience any kind of sensation, the mind acts as an intermediary between the environment and ourselves, instantaneously interpreting all the impressions received through the senses. But in the

act of breathing, the environment actually enters our bodies without any intermediary. It is direct communication between ourselves and the universe.

Conscious awareness of breathing is the most basic and powerful method in meditation practice. The breath is also used as a vehicle or medium for various kinds of exchanges in meditation. We can draw in the essences of all five elements on the breath, because all five are inherent within each of them. We can renew our energy by breathing in tranquillity and peace and let go of all our tensions and worries as we exhale. In a very important mahayana practice, we breathe in the pain and suffering of all living beings and breathe out goodness, happiness, and healing.

Breath does not only refer to the air we inhale and exhale. The word for breath in Sanskrit is prana, which means not just ordinary breath, but life itself. It is life force, vital energy, and spirit. Prana is always in motion, like a restless horse; the horse is an ancient symbol both of prana and of the wind. The mobility of air makes movement possible within the mind and body; not just the movement of breath, but also movement of the limbs, circulation of the blood, messages from the senses, instructions from the brain, and transferal of awareness from one part of the body to another. As a fundamental quality of mind, air is its continual movement, mutability, and activity.

Psychologically, the air element provides a sense of freedom and dynamism. A personality dominated by air is tremendously active physically and mentally and hates to be tied down. Air effortlessly penetrates everywhere and simply floats away from all constraints. Free as air and light as air accurately describe its nature. But all movement needs a reference point. If air is in motion, then it must be moving away from somewhere, toward somewhere, or around something, and that fixed point is provided by the element of earth. Air is always related to earth as its center of motion. The subtle qualities of air give us the power to lift ourselves up from the ground, to raise our arms to the sky, and to dance. It allows our thoughts to fly upward and our hearts to feel light and joyful. Without air there would be no lightheartedness and no laughter.

If there is too much air with not enough earth to balance it, activity will lose its sense of purpose; it is no longer grounded and becomes pure restlessness. People suffering from this kind of imbalance can easily lose touch with reality; they become extremely volatile, their ideas are insubstantial, and their emotions are fickle, blowing here and there like the wind.

If there is an excess of air but no fire of passion to warm it, activity becomes cold, mechanical, devoid of life and meaning. But if there is too little air, then fire cannot

burn at all, water will become stagnant, and earth will grow leaden, like dough that cannot rise. Without movement and a sense of freedom, people sink down into despondency, become closed in on themselves and cease to respond or feel emotion.

The symbol of air is a semicircle, which can also be pictured as a fully drawn bow or as a crescent moon. Its color is green or sometimes black. Green seems a peaceful and restful color because of its association with nature, but in reality, nature is always active and on the move. Green is the color of growth, youth, and freshness. It is the color of unfurling leaves and thrusting shoots. If we think of meadows of rippling grass or leafy trees swaying in the wind, then we can see that green is truly appropriate to be the visible sign of the restless, invisible element of air.

The mandala of air is usually associated with the enlightened activity of compassionate destruction. If pacifying, enriching, and magnetizing have not succeeded, it is sometimes necessary to destroy evil outright, whether it appears in the external world or is a manifestation of one's own negativity. Destruction is based on realizing the essential emptiness of all phenomena: evil forces are liberated into their true nature and all obstacles to enlightenment are overcome. By understanding that in reality there are no such things as hindrances, they are all transformed into opportunities and inspirations on the path.