

Bob Frager on the Five Elements

Ground

The movement style of ground may seem slow but it is actually *patient*. Try moving your hand in a foot-long arc, and, as your hand moves, feel each inch of that arc. Remain aware of each inch of movement, knowing you are able to stop or reverse the movement at any second.

To practice ground, stand as if your feet are rooted to the earth, like a tree with roots going deep into the soil. Feel the solidity, stability, and security that this stance brings. Now practice moving with this same sense of solidity and stability. Remain aware of your hara, your legs, and your feet. Feel your energy flowing through your legs into the ground. Even as you move, your downward flowing awareness will help you remain firmly rooted in the earth. You are solidly grounded at every point in performing each technique. No matter what your partner might try, you cannot be easily unbalanced or countered.

Wind

In contrast to ground, feel your energy rising through your spine and out through the top of your head. This upward flow allows you to move more lightly, easily, and quickly.

F. M. Alexander was one of the great pioneers in teaching body awareness and improvement in movement and physical functioning. His students included John Dewey and George Bernard Shaw.

Alexander was a master of the basic principles of wind. Alexander taught that a prerequisite for free and efficient movement is the natural upward lengthening of the spine. A core practice of his work is the following formula: “Let the neck be free to let the head go forward and up, to let the back lengthen and widen.” The forward and up feeling in the head is as though the head is a balloon, floating gently upward toward the ceiling.

Wind teaches us to move lightly and to hold a weapon or a partner with a light, sensitive grip.

Water

The movement quality of ground is down and solid, and the movement of wind is upward and light. The movement of water is circular and also includes a *yin* backward flowing. One way to practice this is to step forward on your right foot, into a right hanmi position, and focusing your attention on drawing back your left hip. Whenever you move one hip forward, you automatically move the other hip backward. The opposite is also true—whenever you draw one hip back, you are moving the other hip forward. Understanding this relationship imparts a circular quality to your movement.

This quality of flow is that of water. It is also strongly *yin*. The drawing movement of your back hip will draw out your partner’s attacking movements, and will tend to unbalance them. Entering with an awareness of your back hip will give you a sense of flowing around an obstacle. That obstacle might be a strike, a grab, or some other attack. You can also sense a flowing around your partner’s power, like water flowing around a rock, rather than opposing force with force.

Fire

Fire is much the opposite of water. When you move forward, keep your awareness on your front hip and also on the whole entering side of your body. In practicing Aikido, keep your attention constantly flowing toward your partner. You will find that fire is like a strongly flowing river that carries you toward your partner. It will enable you to move more swiftly and more powerfully.

Many students learn fire more quickly if they make an exclamation while moving forward. A positive exclamation also balances the tendency to think of fire as only aggressive or violent. Any powerful emotion has a strong fire component. Try practicing fire movement and saying “Yes!” or “Hallelujah!” I have also found that “Praise Jesus!” works very well (especially if you use the intonation of a Southern gospel preacher.)

Void, or Emptiness

This is by far the most difficult and most advanced of the elements. It pays to begin with the first four elements and to practice void only after becoming comfortable with them.

In learning to move in void, first balance yourself, and balance the four elements in yourself. Feel your legs and feet, feel a solid downward sense of ground. Feel your back relaxed and free, your head light and floating upward, a featherweight, bouyant sense of wind. In your left side feel yin/water (and the readiness to draw in any possible attack). In your right side feel yang/fire (and the readiness to extend outward or forward). Be aware of all that is in front of you. Balance this with a strong sense of your back and all that is in back of you.

Now, move freely, holding on to the feelings of up and down, right and left, forward and back. One direction may be stronger at times, but even then the more powerful direction is always balanced somewhat by its opposite. Remaining aware of back is particularly helpful. We all tend to draw all our energy forward and out of balance. Void includes a sense that you are surrounded by a sphere of awareness, a sphere that helps you remain balanced, aware, and effective, no matter what happens around you.