

*“Now is Āyurveda explained:  
the expression of the five elements,  
and the three principles most fundamental to life.”*

So far in this series we have presented some ideas on the place of Yoga within Indian thought, with comments on the problems in distinguishing the different threads in the tapestry that holds together the cultural, religious and philosophical ideals of India.

The aim is not to criticize, but merely to relate the difficulties of isolating what could be presented under the guise of Yoga.

Perhaps the Christian church is sometimes justified in suggesting that principles of Hinduism are being taught within their church halls. The important thing is to know something about the background to the ideas we find ourselves involved in.

This is the concept of Svādhyāya in Patañjali’s Kriyā Yoga. To examine the things we know, even though we may know them very well. Why, because we ourselves have changed, this concept of change is known in Yoga as Pariṇāma, how we see things today may not be the way they appear tomorrow.

What changes and what doesn’t change was the main theme of the previous article. Two principles were presented; one the Seer or Puruṣa is unchanging, ever present and is the intelligence for the other. This is what is Seen, commonly described as matter or Prakṛti, and includes the mind, senses and body.

Matter or Prakṛti was presented within a structure containing 25 aspects that serves as a philosophical base for Āyurveda and Yoga. It is from this point that this article will explore Āyurveda and its understanding of these principles within the individual.

## Āyurveda

Āyurveda or the science of life, is a holistic system of medicine that is indigenous to and widely practised in India. Its purpose is to maintain the health of the individual and alleviate disease in both its symptomatic and causative state. The duration of life (āyus) of a human being according to the Caraka Saṃhitā is 100 years.

Life according to Caraka is the combination of the human body, senses, mind, and Puruṣa. Puruṣa is that which is absent in a dead body. The body, the brain and the senses are still there but are lifeless because Puruṣa is absent.

Āyurveda concerns itself with the process of life. It is a science devoted to the consideration of what is favourable and what is unfavourable to life. This is in general terms with its analysis of the life process and in specific terms with its understanding of the varying proportions of the elements and their influences in the wellbeing of the individual.

This is the gift of Āyurveda. Each human is regarded as a unique manifestation of the creative energy of the universe.

### 1 The Five Elements (Pañca Bhūta) and the Sense Organs (Indriya)

The five great elements are ether or space, air, fire, water and earth. The physical universe is made up of infinite elemental patterns because of their many, many combinations.

Also remembering the first axiom of Āyurveda, namely, everything in the universe has its counterpart in the human body. Therefore the five basic elements present in all matter also exist within each individual's body.

How do we “know” an element? Through its subtle characteristics.

What are the tools we use for this? The senses of cognition and action.

The 25 aspects (Tattva) of evolution presented in the previous article can be linked together to provide a mode of “being” by which we exist and through which we function.

We can simplify and reduce these aspects from 25 down to 6. Namely 5 elements and the mind/Puruṣa complex.

Āyurveda more generally interprets its philosophy from this viewpoint.

The accompanying chart illustrates how the five elements and their subtle aspects can be grouped.

Mind or 11 <sup>th</sup> Sense	5 Subtle Elements	5 Gross Elements	5 Senses of Knowing	5 Senses of Action
Manas	Tanmātra	Mahā Bhūta	Jñāna Indriya	Karma Indriya
	Sound	Space	Hearing	Speech
	Touch	Air	Feeling	Movement
	Form	Fire	Seeing	Grasping
	Flavour	Water	Tasting	Procreation
	Odour	Earth	Smelling	Elimination

We can see how the five elements operate within the sphere of the senses and are directly related to the individual's ability to perceive and act in the external environment within which he lives.

For example Ether of space is the medium through which sound is transmitted. Sound requires air within space, it cannot manifest within a vacuum. Thus the ethereal element is related to the subtle principle of sound.

Further the sense organ of hearing receives sound, we have the ear as the physical organ and we express sound through speech, the sense organ of action.

Another example of the interaction between the elements and the senses is the link between the element of fire and the eyes. Fire brings light which is necessary for form to be seen.

According to Āyurveda imbalances in the element of fire can manifest as eye problems.

## 2 The Five Elements and the Universe

Comparing the five elements in the human being and the universe we have:

- a) Earth is incarnate, so the incarnation of the human body is earthy.
- b) Just as water carries everything, so in the human being water carries elements and excreta.
- c) Just as fire on earth cooks and bakes things, so the Agni or digestive fire cooks food inside the human system.
- d) Wind affects everything, moving constantly, both in the universe and the human body.
- e) Ether provides space of cavity, both in the universe and in the human body.

## 3 The Five Elements and the Human Body

The theory of five elements (Pañca Bhūta) are essential to an understanding of Āyurvedic anatomy.

The qualities of these five elements within the human body are:

- a) EARTH (Pṛthvī) as the basic element comprises those parts that are gross, firm, incarnate, heavy, inactive, rough, hard.  
For example, nails, bones, gums, flesh, skin, excrement, hair, sinews, teeth, muscles, etc.
- b) WATER (Ap) as the basic element comprises those parts that are fluid, moving, slow, oily, soft, cold, slimy, moist, taste predominant.  
For example chyle, blood, fat, phlegm, lymph, urine, bile, sweat, etc.
- c) FIRE (Agni) as the basic element comprises those parts that are penetrative, light, dry, rough, cold, trans-colour predominant.  
For example bile, digestion, body heat, colour, sight, etc.

- d) AIR (Vāyu) as the basic element comprises those parts which are penetrative, light, dry, rough, cold, transparent, touch predominant, etc.  
For example all movements of the body and organs, blinking, inhale, exhale.
- e) ETHER (Ākāśa) as the basic element comprises those parts that are penetrative, light, soft, smooth, transparent, sound predominant, etc.  
For example all cavities, gross and subtle, pores, channels.

These are examples of the primary qualities of the elements and how they manifest themselves in the human body.

#### 4 The Theory of Tridoṣa and the Five Elements (Pañca Bhūta)

So we can see from these descriptions that Āyurveda concerns itself with the five elements and the way they express themselves within the human body. However, when the ancient teachers began to apply these ideals to health of the individual they expanded on the theory of the five.

Here we come to the concept of Tridoṣa or the three energetic principles that underpin and activate the more physical aspects of the five elements.

Earth, water, fire, air and ether, the five basic elements, are the physical manifestations in the body of three energetic principles of Air, Fire and Water. Collectively these three principles are known as Tridoṣa.

The relationship can be illustrated as:

Principle or Doṣa	Element	Āyurvedic Name	Common Name	General Effect
Air expressed as:	Ether & Air	Vāta	Wind	Catabolic
Fire expressed as:	Fire & Water	Pitta	Sun	Metabolic
Water expressed as:	Water & Earth	Kapha	Moon	Anabolic

Here we have the second axiom of Āyurveda: Air, Fire and Water are the three energetic principles most fundamental to life.

When these three principles are in harmony with each other, in the body and with the external environment then there is wellbeing. When the uniquely personalised equilibrium of these three principles in the individual is disturbed, then we have disease.

It is only when there is a disturbance in the equilibrium that the negative effect of a particular Doṣa becomes apparent, hence the literal meaning of the word Doṣa as defect.

So the energetic principles of Air, Fire and Water become problematic when their unique individualised equilibrium is disturbed.

Furthermore a Doṣa can cause imbalance in the body through being in excess as well as being deficient. For example an expression of Air or Vāta is activity, too much Vāta and we have too much potential activity seeking expression.

This could manifest as insomnia or periods of waking during the night. Other possible effects of excess Vāta is wind in the colon leading to headaches or digestive disturbances.

### Relationships of the Tridoṣa or Three Principles

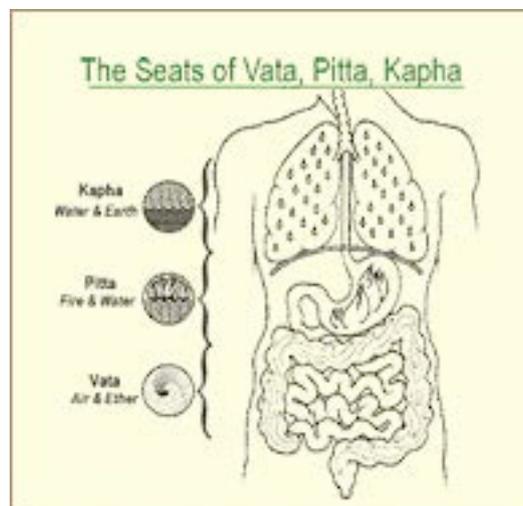
The human system is like a house or temple supported by three pillars. The Tridoṣa are the three pillars or supports for the human being.

Head to chest is the pillar of Kapha or Principle of Water. Chest to navel is the pillar of Pitta or Principle of Fire. Navel to Feet is the pillar of Vāta or Principle of Air

The base is supporting all the principles. Vāta is the base and is the source of life for the other two. Only with the help of Vāta can Pitta exist and function. Only with Vāta and Pitta can Kapha exist and function.

From this we can see that although the three principles pervade the whole body, they are naturally concentrated in certain areas. Water is especially strong between the neck and the diaphragm. Fire between the diaphragm and the navel. Air is strong below the navel.

This can be illustrated as:



Looking at the relationship another way. Air being light moves upwards and enkindles fire, it also it moves downwards and excretes waste. Water being heavy moves downwards to regulate fire. Too much air and the fire burns too brightly, too much water and the fire becomes dull.

So there must be some proportion between the Doṣa. Their movements are in the natural order of things. When the movements of Air, Fire and Water are synchronised, balance and thus wellbeing is maintained in the body.

## Summary

This continues our introduction to Āyurveda with the theory of the five elements or Pañca Bhūta and how they operate with in the individual through the medium of the senses or Indriya.

We also saw how Āyurveda interprets the macrocosmic and microcosmic expression of the five elements within the universe and in the individual.

This brought us to the theory of Tridoṣa and the second axiom of Āyurveda namely, Air, Fire and Water are the three principles most fundamental to life.

Along with this some ideas were introduced on their mutual relationship.

The next article will expand on the qualities of each principle or Doṣa, looking at their special characteristics and the specific “seat” of each within the human being.

Originally published in Yoga Today Magazine in 1986 and revised and updated in 2010

<http://www.dharmadownloads.info>