



This article explores the balance of the Three Principles in the individual and their effect on the process of change and age.

1. Spirituality and Materiality

Indian thought is often associated with the notion of spirituality and Indian life with poverty and disease. From experience of living in India it is more possible to appreciate how these seemingly opposite views come about.

One is confronted in India with the basic issues of life and death, health and disease, spirituality and materiality. There is much more contrast, much more of a black and white rather than shades of grey.

Death happens in front of you. And the dead are put onto open biers, rather than being shut away in wooden boxes. Children play, pray, and defecate in the same circle. The leper begs for alms amidst the silk sari shoppers. The streets of Chennai, in South India, are a mixture of taxis, cows, rickshaws, goats, bicycles, pigs, dogs and chickens intermingling and coexisting. In the house where I had an apartment a cow lived in the garage; barely 200 yards away whole families lived and slept on waste ground with no shelter at all.

One can appreciate the ancient sages raising issue at the reality of life with questions on its purpose, the nature of suffering, the existence of states free from suffering, and the question of whether there is a creator and does he still concern himself with the creation.

For the last concept one can use the analogy of the clockmaker as a person who builds a clock, winds it up, and lets it run its course. Is God like the clockmaker allowing creation to run its course uninterrupted to the final Pralaya or dissolution, where matter merges back into its primordial mass?

Or is God still actively involved in the creation and its purpose? Or as some schools of Indian thought maintain, existence is a random occurrence without a creator, sense of order or purpose. Believe only what you can see with your own eyes is the premise of Cārvāka or school of Indian materialism.

From these views can see that Indian thought and Indian life are a rich tapestry of ideas and realities interwoven within a culture that can both attract and repel.

2. Well-Being and Life

We have also seen from earlier articles that the subject of well-being was considered to play a relevant role in the development of religious experience and the living of family life.

A composition by T Krishnamacharya, the Yoga Rahasya (Secret of Yoga) presents in a very practical way the problems encountered during the family years and the role for Yoga in helping to deal with these situations.

It tells of different types of practice for different stages of one's life. Here the family life is very important and yet so much energy is used in protecting the partner, the children, the grandparents, the relatives, the workers, the beggars, the family cow, that one forgets to protect oneself.

This teaching tells us that the need for Yoga is greater because of the demands of work and family life and thus a greater possibility of loss of contact with the deeper aspects of our psyche, but the time available for practice is less. Therefore at least some Yoga practice, in this case Prāṇāyāma, should be done for one's own benefit and for the benefit of those who depend on you. We must at times do something for ourselves without giving up our responsibilities.

We can see from this emphasis that Yoga has a very relevant role within family life and is not just for the monk or Saṁnyāsi. Another point is that Yoga doesn't advise extremes such as fasting. Remember Yoga practice aims to keep us in touch with our deeper sense of nourishment and any practices which don't have this as their effect should be re-examined.

Yoga doesn't advocate deprivation of things that promote mental clarity and inner well-being, particularly if our Sādhana (practice aim) is within the family cycle. Yoga should bring us closer to life and understanding our relationship with our surroundings, not be a withdrawal and escape from responsibilities and action.

3. Well-Being and the Psyche

In the Yoga Sūtra I 30 Patañjali lists disease as the first of the obstacles that interrupt our efforts to stabilise our mind. Here one can define disease as dis-ease or a state where the person is distracted and uncomfortable. This brings us back to Duḥkha and the idea of increasing our understanding of the influence of our surroundings on our sense of well-being. This is the third axiom of Āyurveda "Whatever affects the mind affects the body and vice versa."

Patañjali was well aware of this axiom and went further in explaining what was the cause of the situation that led to the problem. This is why many ideas are suggested to work on different levels for different people at different times.

However he gives a common starting point in the Yoga Sūtra II 16

"Heyam Duḥkham Anāgatam"

We must respect the past effects, see the current situation and work towards a lifestyle where we are not creating new problems, only resolving any negative effects arising from old problems.

AYURVEDA AND THE HUMAN CONSTITUTION

Having previously presented some basic ideas on the three principles, Air, Fire and Water, we can move further into how their relationship determines our individual constitution.

Āyurveda tells us that each individual has a matrix of energy and matter unique to their body and mind. Within this pattern we have a state of dominance of one or more the three principles. This is “natural” and unique for each of us and never changes throughout our life, though it can be temporarily disturbed.

One cause of this unique matrix is the state of the principles of Air, Fire and Water in the bodies of our parents at the time of conception. At the moment of union of the spermatozoon with the ovum the constitution of the individual is determined by the permutations and combinations of the energies of Air, Fire and Water within their parents’ body.

This setting of the pattern is further compounded but not altered by the lifestyle of the mother during pregnancy. This is why teachings like the Yoga Rahasya are very specific in detailing the care and attention needed for and by the woman towards the developing child. The importance of Yoga practice is emphasised for the growing foetus as well as preparing the woman’s body for birth.

The primary characteristics of each principle will be presented. We will see that Āyurveda analyses the individual as a combination of two or more principles. What is important here is to understand the tendencies that arise from this combination and how we can support it through our Yoga practice, actions and living habits.

For instance if Vāta or Air is the dominating principle we can come to understand those situations, foods, actions or even Yoga Āsana and Prāṇāyāma which both aggravate or lessen its dominance. This needs to be further related to the secondary most dominant principle ie Air supported by Fire or Air supported by Water.

In Āyurveda there are seen to be seven primary combinations that determine individual constitutions:

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| 1 | Vāta – Air | |
| 2 | Pitta – Fire | |
| 3 | Kapha – Water | |
| 4 | Vāta + Pitta | Air + Fire |
| 5 | Pitta + Kapha | Fire + Water |
| 6 | Vāta + Kapha | Air + Water |
| 7 | Vāta + Pitta + Kapha | Air + Fire + Water |

However, among these seven general types there are innumerable subtle variations that depend upon the combination of the various aspects of individual constitution such as body frame, colour, hair, nails, pulse, appetite, sleep patterns, dreams, mind, elimination, to name a few.

THE THREE PRINCIPLES AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Looking at each principle we will see the characteristics associated with that principle. It must be realised that the description reflects the pure aspect of that principle and no person is composed of one principle only. Each person is a combination of two or more principles with one as a predominant influence.

Furthermore the system may become disturbed not in the dominant principle but in the secondary principle. This someone who is Pitta dominant with Vāta as the secondary principle may experience disturbances in the functions of Vāta within the system.

Because of this Pitta may then become disturbed in the sense that wind disturbs and dissipates fire. For example trying to cook on an open fire on a windy day affects the intensity of the fire and thus its ability to cook well.

Here the starting point to restore our personal constitutional matrix is to reduce the impact of the wind or Vāta on our system and through this containment of the wind the fire can settle back into its core function of, amongst other roles, being able to cook efficiently.

So the aspects listed below are just a few examples and intended as a very general guide to encourage a better awareness of our tendencies, both physiologically and psychologically.

HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS AND THE THREE PRINCIPLES			
	Vāta – Air	Pitta – Fire	Kapha – Water
Frame	Slender	Average	Stout
Weight	Tends to Under	Average	Tends to Over
Colour	Pale, Grey	Pink, Red	Pale, White
Hair	Rough, Dry	Soft, Early Grey	Oily and Dark
Nails	Rough, Cracked	Delicate, Pink	Smooth, Strong
Appetite	Variable, Light	Good, Excessive	Slow, Steady
Elimination	Dry, Constipated	Soft, Loose	Thick, Slow
Sleep	Scanty, Unsound	Light, Sound	Heavy, Sound
Dreams	Flying, Anxious	Fiery, Violent	Water, Swimming
Mind	Restless, Anxious	Irritable, Angry	Calm, Slow
Memory	Poor	Sharp	Good
Activity	Over-active	Focused	Steady
Pulse	Fast, Zigzag	Moderate, Jumpy	Slow, Broad

YOGA AND THE HUMAN CONSTITUTION

We can see from these ideas that our individual constitution and its tendencies must be considered in the evolution our Yoga practice.

A group of students could present a myriad of combinations when considered from an Āyurveda viewpoint. Therefore in proposing a practice we must consider the person as the primary focus rather than the technique or posture.

It is difficult to say that a particular practice suits all conditions or individuals. We can see that for some people a particular practice may aggravate a particular principle and therefore add to an already existing imbalance. Or the same practice at certain times may disturb rather than support.

For example for some female students I have proposed four different practices according to the phases of the monthly menstrual cycle. We have the pre-ovulation, the post-ovulation, the pre-menstrual and the menstrual aspects of the monthly rhythm each with their own characteristics and impact on the way that we experience our inner and outer world.

This is why the traditional approach to Yoga was ideally on a one-to-one basis, where the teacher came to know the students very well. From this insight the teacher could propose practices that were personal and related to particular needs and yet also allowed flexibility according to how circumstances changed for that person.

This is why all the teachings stress the importance of a teacher as a guide, a friend and more important a mirror by which we can come to know ourselves at the different levels of body, energy, mind, intelligence and emotions.

So notwithstanding environmental and social changes there are emotional, mental and physical cycles bio-rhythms in our life and we need to have a practice that is sensitive to these patterns and changes with the tides of life.

For instance both Āyurveda and Yoga talk about the three phases of life and how each phase has a particular principle dominant. From this insight the shift in the impact of different principles during the stages of life can be supported by a specific direction in one's practice.

1 Childhood

During childhood there is an increased intake of external matter to support the process of growth. It is the age of absorption, of learning, of development. The principle of Kapha or Water is linked to the constructive metabolism or anabolic principle.

Therefore the child's diet, actions and practice should focus on developing a healthy body, sharp senses, clear mind and an active interest in the outside world.

The Yoga practice in this phase should be focused on Āsana and in using specific postures and styles of execution that develop strength, agility, sharpness of co-ordination, and maintain the already concentrated field of Prana or bio-energy initiated by birth.

2 Middle years

During the middle years the growth in childhood has ceased. There is still an exchange between within and without but little obvious change in the physique or intellect.

It is the age of construction, of one's family, profession, and social involvements. Generally we are very involved in the external environment and very active in our work and family.

The principle of Pitta or Fire is linked to metabolic activity for the conversion of energy. Therefore the middle years should focus on sustaining what we have and not letting our health, mental faculties and interest decline as a result of life commitments and their resulting stresses and strain.

The Yoga practice should concentrate on these techniques that allow us to maintain or sustain what we have. We should not lose the assets of childhood. Emphasis is placed on maintaining a strong field of Prāṇa or Bio-energy because it is dissipated by the very activities we find ourselves involved in.

For instance work, social commitments, stress, strain, poor diet, sexual activity, use of social or medical drugs, all weaken our natural concentration of Prāṇa and therefore of mind and finally of body. During these years particular emphasis should be placed on maintaining and refining our Prāṇāyāma practice to help balance the effects of the life patterns are involved in.

3 Later Years

In later years there is a gradual withdrawal of the body tissue and diminishing of its power with a deterioration of mental capacity and a flow of matter from interior to exterior. It is a time of gradual withdrawal from life, a movement of matter and energy back to the source from which it emerged.

It is the time of Vāta or principle of Air. There is a release of energy, a destruction of the metabolism or catabolic activity. Our social and work responsibilities have lessened, our Dharma (commitments) towards our family and children have been fulfilled. We are free to prepare for Mokṣa or liberation from the worldly level of existence and our return to and merging with the source of life.

Yoga sees this as a time of retraction. Whilst understanding that we must minimise the effects of the ageing process our practice must respect that we are moving into this phase of our life and prepare us for the final merging.

Therefore during these years, although maintaining some aspects of the practice from childhood and middle years, the emphasis must be on Dhyāna or meditation on what is beyond the personality and Vairāgya or non-clinging to the more external aspects of our lives.

The movement is from involvement with the eternal to understanding or involvement with that which is within us. This phase is known as the Saṁnyāsi Krama or stage where one surrenders what one has accumulated and moves more towards spiritual rather than material ideals.

SUMMARY

Our well-being and understanding of the factors which contribute to and are detrimental to that state is the concern, for slightly different reasons, of both Āyurveda and Yoga.

Āyurveda concentrates more on physiological well-being, Yoga more on a psychological well-being.

However, both do not see the body and the mind as being separate. Hence the third axiom of Ayurveda “Whatever affects the mind affects the body and whatever affects the body affects mind.”

Furthermore each sees the individual as being unique and even that uniqueness is subject to the changing, ageing patterns of growth, sustenance and contraction.

There are other factors such as the quality of our attitude towards our internal and external environment and the way we choose to support it or not, through food, relationships and actions.

Both Āyurveda and Yoga tell us that to live in disharmony will inevitably be a cause for disease at some point in the future.

Our task as individuals is to understand those factors that allow us to develop or at least not lose the sense of harmony. So the ideas of Āyurveda and Yoga are presented as a means of learning more of ourselves and our behaviour and through it coming to appreciate what we have and what we need to achieve or avoid.

The next article will look at how Yoga views bio-energy or Prāṇa and the disease process.

The work with Āyurveda will continue with the three principles and the five functions of each within the individual.

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