

Textbook of Ayurveda

Fundamental Principles of Ayurveda

Volume One

by

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The
Ayurvedic
Press

Albuquerque, New Mexico

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Cover design and illustration: Kevin Curry.

Illustrations by Shawn O' Connor. Illustrations in Chapters 4 and 9 by Carlos Luna. All art in this book is based on drawings by Vasant Lad.

Ganesha drawings in front pages by Vasant Lad.

Edited by Laura Sullivan, Glen Crowther, and Margaret Smith Peet.

First Edition 2002

Published in the United States of America

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 00-009373

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lad, Vasant, 1943-

Textbook of Ayurveda / by Vasant Dattatray Lad.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 1-883725-07-0

1. Medicine, Ayurvedic--History. 2. Medicine, Ayurvedic--Philosophy.

I. Title.

R606 L33 2000

615.5' 3--dc21

00-009373

Published by:

The Ayurvedic Press; P.O. Box 23445; Albuquerque, NM 87192-1445

For more information on Ayurveda. contact:

The Ayurvedic Institute

11311 Menaul Blvd. NE, Albuquerque, NM 87112

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2

Universal Attributes and Doshic Theory

आयुर्वेद

In chapter one we considered the Shad Darshan, the six philosophies, which Āyurveda accepts as a basis for its thought. We also briefly discussed the five elements. In this chapter we will go into greater detail about the elements and come to a better understanding of how these basic principles lie at the heart of Āyurvedic science.

We will first try to understand the inanimate world and will then connect to the animate world through doshic theory. The purpose of this approach is to bridge a model of physics to a model of physiology through gunas (universal attributes) and karmas (actions).

The Five Elements and Their Attributes

The rishis perceived that in the beginning the world existed in an unmanifested state of Consciousness, avyākta—meaning unmanifest. From that state the subtle vibrations of the cosmic, soundless sound Aum manifested. From the subtle vibration of Aum came the Ether or Space element. This ethereal element then began to move and through its subtle movements created the Air element, which is Ether in action. The movement of Air produced friction and through friction

heat was generated. Particles of this heat combined to form intense light and from this light the Fire element emerged. Thus, Ether produced Air and it was Air that further manifested into Fire. The heat of Fire dissolved and liquefied certain ethereal elements, forming Water that then solidified to form the molecules of Earth. In this way, Ether manifested into the four elements of Air, Fire, Water, and Earth.

From Earth, all physical bodies for organic living beings were created, including both the plant and animal kingdoms. Earth was also the origin of all inorganic substances that comprise the mineral kingdom. Thus, out of the womb of the Five Elements all matter was born.

The five basic elements exist in all matter. Water provides the classic example: the solid state of water, ice, is a manifestation of the Earth principle. Latent heat (Fire) in the ice liquefies it, revealing the Water principle. Eventually water turns into steam, expressing the Air principle. The steam disappears into Ether or Space. Thus the five basic elements—Ether, Air, Fire, Water, and Earth—are all present in one substance. All five originated from the energy within Cosmic Consciousness and all five are present in all matter in the universe. Thus, energy and matter are one.

Man is a microcosm of the universe and, therefore, the five basic elements present in all matter also exist within each individual. In the human body, many spaces are aspects of the Ether or Space element. The spaces in the mouth, nose, gastrointestinal tract, respiratory tract, abdomen, thorax, capillaries, and tissues are all examples of Space.

Air is the element of movement. All movements involve Air as an element, because it alone moves everything. Any time there is motion, it means Air is present. The nature of the elements themselves determines the nature of physiology. Within the human body, Air is present in the pulsations of the heart and the expansion and contraction of the lungs. Under a microscope, even a single cell can be seen to move. Response to a stimulus is the movement of afferent and efferent nerve impulses, which are sensory and motor movements respectively. Movements of the nervous system are also governed by the Air principle present in the body.

The third element is Fire. The source of Fire and light in the solar system is the sun. In the human body, the source of Fire is metabolism. Fire works in the digestive system as well as in the gray matter of the brain, where Fire manifests as intelligence. Fire also activates the retina to perceive light.

Therefore, body temperature, digestion, thinking processes, and vision are all functions of bodily Fire. All metabolism and enzyme systems are controlled by this element.

Water, the fourth element, manifests in the body as the secretions of digestive juices, in the mucous membranes and in plasma and cytoplasm. Water is vital for the functioning of all the systems of the body. For example, dehydration resulting from diarrhea and vomiting must be treated immediately to protect the patient's life.

Earth, the fifth element, is also present in the microcosm of the human being. Life is possible on this planet because the Earth holds all living and non-living substances to its solid surface. In the body, all solid structures are derived from Earth.

Table 3: The Senses and the Elements

Jñānendriya (Sensory Faculties)	Sensory Organs	Karmendriya (Faculties of Action)	Motor Organs	Tanmātrās (Objects of the Senses)	Maha Bhūtas (Elements)
Hearing	Ears	Speech	Vocal Cords	Shabda (Sound)	Ether
Tactile perception	Skin	Giving and receiving	Hands	Sparsha (Touch)	Air
Vision	Eyes	Walking	Legs	Rūpa (Form)	Fire
Taste	Tongue	Procreation	Genitals	Rasa (Taste)	Water
Smell	Nose	Excretion	Excretory organs	Gandha (Odor or Smell)	Earth

The Five Elements and Tanmātrās

The five elements manifest in the functioning of the five senses as well as in certain functions of human physiology. Tan means subtle and mātrā means elements. The tanmātrās, the subtle elements, are the objects of the five senses. The five tanmātrās are sound, touch, form, taste, and odor or smell; the five senses are hearing, tactile perception, vision, taste, and smell. The tanmātrās are the ways in which the objective world is sensed. The five elements have functional integrity with the five sensory organs, which allows us to perceive the external environment. Their presence is the reason for the existence of the senses themselves. (see illustration on page 7)

The tanmātrās form the Common Ground for the expression of the objective world and the entire world exists on

this Ground. Another meaning of tan is mother, and mātrā also means matter—the mother of matter. The mother of this whole world is the tanmātrās. The tanmātrās are in the womb of the Cosmic Mother, Prakruti. It is this energy that gives rise to the objective five elements. Each element is related primarily to one tanmātrā but can contain a portion of the others as well. Ether comes out of shabda tanmātrā (sound); Air out of shabda and sparsha tanmātrās (sound and touch); Fire out of shabda, sparsha and rūpa tanmātrās (sound, touch and sight); Water out of shabda, sparsha, rūpa and rasa (sound, touch, sight and taste); and Earth out of shabda, sparsha, rūpa, rasa and gandha (sound, touch, form, taste and odor).

These five elements—Ether,⁸ Air, Fire, Water, and Earth—are also related to the five organs of action—mouth, hands, feet, genitals and excretory organs—which allow us to respond to the input we receive from the objective world. Ether is the medium through which sound is transmitted and is thus related to the function of hearing. The sensory organ of hearing is the ear. The organ of action associated with the sense of hearing is the mouth and vocal cords, which produce sound.

Air is related to the sense of touch and the sensory organ of touch is the skin. The organ of action related to the sense of touch is the hand. The skin of the hand is especially sensitive and the hand is responsible for the actions of holding, giving, and receiving.

Fire, which manifests as light, heat, and color is related to vision. The sensory organ of vision is the eye. The organ of action related to the sense of vision is the feet. A blind man can walk but his walking has no direction. Eyes give direction to the action of walking.

Water is related to taste. The sensory organ of taste is the tongue. Without water the tongue cannot perceive the different tastes. The related organ of action is the reproductive system. The tongue is closely related in function to the action of the genitals (penis and clitoris). In Āyurveda, the penis and clitoris are considered the lower tongue and the tongue in the mouth is the upper tongue. The person who controls the upper tongue has control over the lower tongue and vice versa.

Earth is related to the sense of smell. The sensory organ of smell is the nose. The organs of action related to the sense of smell are the excretory organs. The nose is related to the anus.

8. Ether is the preferred term when referring to the five elements. Space normally refers to physical space.



This relationship is demonstrated by the fact that a person who has constipation or an unclean colon experiences bad breath and a dull sense of smell.

The Basic Attributes of Tridosha—Vāta, Pitta, Kapha

According to Āyurvedic philosophy, the entire cosmos is an interplay of the energies of the five elements—Ether, Air, Fire, Water, Earth. Āyurveda groups the five elements into three basic types of energy or functional principles that are present in everybody and everything. There are no single words in English to describe these principles, so we use the original Sanskrit words vāta, pitta and kapha, called the three doshas or tridosha. Dosha literally means “fault,” “impurity,” or “mistake.” However, that definition is not adequate in this context. Dosha is a specific word used by Charaka, Sushruta, and Vāgbhata. Dosha is organization. As long as the doshas are normal in quality and quantity, they maintain a harmonious psychophysiology. The moment they go out of balance, they corrupt or pollute or vitiate the dhātus (bodily tissues) and then they become dosha (here meaning impurity). Therefore, dosha is that which becomes vitiated and then affects the bodily tissues, leading to disease. But in a healthy way, dosha means three principles that govern psychophysiological response and pathological changes. The doshas—vāta, pitta, and kapha—bind the five elements into living flesh. The concept of support is a natural function of these principles of physiology we call vāta, pitta, kapha. They are the agents of DNA which form the blueprint for the physiology. They are energy complexes; these complexes are known by their attributes, or gunas.

Energy is required to create movement so that fluids and nutrients get to the cells, enabling the body to function. Energy is also necessary to metabolize the nutrients in the cells and is utilized to lubricate and maintain cellular structure. Vāta is the energy of movement, pitta the energy of transformation, digestion or metabolism, and kapha the energy of lubrication and structure.

In Āyurveda, body, mind, and consciousness work together in maintaining balance. They are simply viewed as different facets of one's being. To learn how to balance body, mind, and consciousness requires an understanding of how vāta, pitta and kapha work together. According to Āyurvedic philosophy, the entire cosmos is an interplay of the energies of the five basic elements—Ether, Air, Fire, Water, and Earth. Vāta, pitta and kapha are combinations of the five elements that manifest as patterns in all creation.

Ancient Āyurveda might have classified human beings into five body types based upon the predominant element. But as Ether is essentially inert and Earth is the solid, supporting foundation of creation, these two elements did not lend themselves to a typology as well as did the active, mobile, and changing elements of Air, Fire and Water. Āyurveda incorporates the three active elements as the primary elements in the principle of tridosha.

Every dosha is composed of all five elements. However, two elements are predominant in each.

Vāta is Air and Ether.

Pitta is Fire and Water.

Kapha is Water and Earth.

Vāta, pitta, and kapha are the very foundation of Āyurveda. The concept of the humors or principles—wind, bile, and phlegm—found in the Greek medicine of the past is likely an offspring of Āyurveda.

Vāta. In the body, vāta, principally composed of Ether and Air, is the subtle energy associated with movement. It governs breathing, blinking, muscle and tissue movement, the pulsation of the heart, and all the movements in the cytoplasm and cell membranes. In balance, vāta promotes creativity and flexibility. Out of balance, vāta produces fear, anxiety, and abnormal movements.

Pitta. Principally made up of Fire and Water, pitta expresses itself as the body's metabolic system. It governs digestion, absorption, assimilation, nutrition, metabolism, body temperature—all transformations. In balance, pitta promotes understanding and intelligence. Out of balance, pitta arouses anger, hatred, jealousy, and inflammatory disorders.

Kapha. Kapha is principally a combination of Earth and Water and is the energy that forms the body's structure, and provides the "glue" or cohesion that holds the cells together. Kapha supplies the water for all bodily parts and systems. It lubricates joints, moisturizes the skin and maintains immunity. In balance, kapha is expressed as love, calmness, and forgiveness. Out of balance, it leads to attachment, greed, possessiveness, and congestive disorders.

Attributes (Gunas) and Their Effects on Doshas

Charaka, the great Āyurvedic physician of ancient times, found that all organic and inorganic substances, as well as all thoughts and actions, have definite attributes. These attributes

contain potential energy and express the static nature of a substance, while the actions express kinetic energy. Attributes and actions are closely related since the potential energy of the attributes eventually becomes action, or kinetic energy, released when the substance undergoes chemical transformation such as burning or digestion. According to Āyurveda, there are twenty basic attributes.

Charaka categorized these attributes into 10 opposite pairs (e.g., sharp and slow or dull, dry and oily, liquid and dense). These opposite forces function together. Basically, the universe is the manifestation of the two opposites, male and female energy. Actually it is possible to understand the universe in its entirety in terms of the interactions of opposing basic attributes. These pairs of opposites must be understood as having relative relationships—relative to subject, relative to individual and also relative to standard normality. Nothing is absolute.

Table 4: The 20 Attributes and Their Relationship to the Tridosha

Vāta	Pitta	Kapha
Dry Light Cold Rough Subtle Mobile Clear	Hot Sharp Light Liquid Mobile Oily	Heavy Slow / Dull Cold Oily Liquid Slimy / Smooth Dense Soft Static Sticky / Cloudy Hard Gross
Elements of the Tridosha		
Space + Air	Fire + Water	Water + Earth

Vāta, pitta, and kapha each have their own attributes, in fact each of these terms is really only a name for a grouping of attributes. Vāta represents the collection of dry, light, cold, rough, subtle, mobile, and clear qualities. Pitta, similarly, is made up of hot, sharp, light, liquid, mobile and slightly oily qualities. Kapha includes attributes of heavy, slow or dull, cold,