

## Ayurvedic Concepts of Health and Illness

Ayurveda, or “the science of life,” is heavily influenced by the Sankhya school of philosophy, most notably through the concepts of *purusa* (pure consciousness) and *prakrti* (nature or materiality) (Mishra 482; Rodrigues 123). In this model, *prakrti* creates all materiality out of her three qualities, or *gunas* (Gopinath 105; Rodrigues 123):

- *Sattva*, which is bright and pure,
- *Rajas*, which is mobile and stimulating,
- *Tamas*, which is heavy and dull.

The *gunas* recombine in various proportions to form the 23 elements that make up the manifest universe (Rodrigues 123). Important to concepts of physiology in Ayurveda are the five gross elements (*mahabhutas*), which combine to form the body’s 7 *dhatu*s (tissues) and 3 *dosas* (humors) (Pioreschi 238; Rodrigues 124). It is the equilibrium between the *dhatu*s, *dosas*, and their waste products, *malas*, which determines good health, while stress to this equilibrium causes disease.

### ***Pancabhutas***

Dated back to the Vedas, the *pancabhuta* (five elements) theory suggests that all matter is composed of the five *mahabhutas* – *prthvi*, *ap*, *tejas*, *vayu*, and *akasa* (Pioreschi 238; Subbarayappa 12). Although often understood in terms of the Greek elements of earth, water, fire, air, and ether, respectively, to do so is to diminish the meaning of the Sanskrit word (Subbarayappa 12):

- *Prthvi* gives mass, roughness, inertia and density, and is associated with smell and the nose.

- *Ap* gives fluidity, viscosity, coldness and softness, and is associated with taste and the tongue.
- *Tejas* gives hotness, dryness, sharpness, and courage, and is associated with colour and the eyes.
- *Vayu* gives movement, pulsations, and the sense of lightness, and is associated with touch and the skin.
- *Akasa*, which should not be equated with Ether, is an omnipresent element giving space. It is mainly associated with sound and the ears.

Interestingly, even at their most pure, each element also has the others present in it, but in smaller proportions. The interaction between these elements is the basis for the formation of the physical and physiological body (Gopinath 99 - 100).

### ***Dhatus***

The 7 permanent tissues (*dhatus*) that make up an organism are each composed of all five *mahabhutas*, but in different proportions. The *dhatus* include *rasa* (the essence of digested food, basically lymph and chyle), *rakta* (blood, which is *rasa* coloured red), *mamsa* (flesh), *meda* (fat), *asthi* (bone), *majja* (bone marrow), and *sukra* (reproductive essence, or sperm) (I.P. Singh 121; Prioreshi 256; Vir 414).

### ***Tri-dosa/tri-dhatu***

While the physical body is composed of the 7 *dhatus*, its physiological functioning depends on the 3 *dosas*, or troubles (Prioreshi 259). Each person has two sources of *dosas*. The first is inherited, and is termed *dosa prakrti* (R.H. Singh, 131). This represents the individual's normal proportion of the *dosas*, which also determines the physical, physiological and mental

characteristics of that person (Gopinath 80; I.P. Singh 120). Physical characteristics include strength, eating and bowel habits, and skin, hair and eye colour (Gopinath 80). While *dosa prakrti* does not change over time, the *dosas* obtained from food do fluctuate, depending on the type of food ingested, as well as the climate, geography, age and emotional state of the individual (I. P. Singh, 120). The three *dosas* are *vata* (wind), *pitta* (bile), and *kapha* (phlegm), but again, our translations do not carry the full meaning of these words, and a more descriptive explanation is necessary (Subbarayappa 17).

*Vata* has a high proportion of *vayu* and *akasa*, and is regarded as the regulatory *dosa*, governing all metabolic activity and the movement of the other two *dosa* (Gopinath 100, 104; I.P. Singh 120). It is responsible for excretion, voluntary actions, all mental and motor activity, respiration, circulation, and enthusiasm (Subbarayappa 17; Gopinath 104; Mishra 484). The mental characteristics associated with *vata* include cowardliness, grief, ungratefulness and humbleness (Gopinath 80). A decrease in *vata* results in sluggish movements and speech, while an increase results in twitches, pain, and sleep loss (Susruta 159, 163). Diseases resulting from irregular *vata*, which is aggravated by excessive exercise, bitter tastes, and the cold, include dwarfism, insomnia and paralysis (Govindan 31). There are five forms of *vata*: *prana*, *udana*, *samana*, *vyana*, and *apana* (Pioreschi 259; Susruta 156-7).

*Pitta* is mainly composed of *tejas/agni* and is regarded as the excitatory *dosa*, responsible for catabolism (breaking things down) and producing heat (Gopinath 104; I.P. Singh 120). It is thus responsible for digestion, tissue metabolism and vision, as well as boldness, arrogance, energy, and forbearance (Subbarayappa 17; Gopinath 80, 104; Mishra 484). A decrease in *pitta* is felt in low body temperature and digestion, while an increase results in a liking for cold, loss of strength, and fainting (Susruta 159, 163). *Pitta* is aggravated by anger, heat and pungent, sour

or hot foods, while diseases include fever, jaundice, herpes and bad breath (Govindan 33).

Again, there are five forms: *aloca*, *karanjaka*, *sadhaka*, *bhrajaka*, and *pacaka* (Prioreshi 250; Susruta 156-7).

*Kapha* has a high proportion of *ap* and *prthvi* (Gopinath 100). Contrary to *pitta*, it is an inhibitory *dosa*, responsible for anabolic activity and the maintenance of cellular and intracellular structures and the body's internal environment (I.P. Singh 120; Gopinath 104; Mishra 484). In essence, it is responsible for strength and stability of the body as well as the mental states associated with strength, such as courage, knowledge, vitality and zest, but also devotion, faithfulness and forgiveness (Subbarayappa 17; Gopinath 80; Mishra 484). Symptoms of decreased *kapha* include thirst and loss of sleep, while the opposite results in coldness, drowsiness and stiffness (Susruta 159, 163). Diseases include anorexia, obesity, goiter, and lethargy, which stem from laziness, sweet and sour foods, and wheat products (Govindan 34). The five forms are *kledaka*, *avalambaka*, *tarbaka*, *bodhaka*, and *slesmaka*.

### ***Mala***

*Mala*, or excreta, are those elements that are formed from the different *dhatu*s. While these include more obvious excretions such as urine and sweat, the *dosas* are also produced as byproducts of certain tissues (I.P. Singh 121).

### **Relationship between the *dosas*, *dhatu*s and *malas***

Each of the 7 *dhatu*s, except for semen, has three components – its own essence, a *mala*, and the essence of the next, more pure substance:

- *Rakta* is purified from *rasa*, whose *mala* is *kapha*.

- *Mamsa* is purified from *rakta*, whose *mala* is *pitta*.
- *Meda* is purified from *mamsa*, whose *malas* are excretions of the orifices.
- *Asthi* is purified from *meda*, whose *mala* is sweat.
- *Majji* is purified from *asthi*, whose *malas* are hair and nails.
- *Sukra* is purified from *majji*, whose *malas* are feces and skin.
- *Sukra* is the purest of the *dhatu*s; it produces no *malas* and no other *dhatu* is purified from it.

It should be noted that both *pitta* and *kapha* are formed as waste products, but there is no mention of *vata* production. It is actually formed based on the proportion of food to *agni* (digestive agent). There also seems to be a grey area between *dosa*, *dhatu* and *mala*. In essence, *dhatu*s are substances that help in the normal functioning of the body, *dosas* are those that disturb the normal functioning, and *malas* are those that cause imbalance in the normal state. This means that a *dhatu* can become a *dosa* or a *mala* when in an abnormal state, and a *dosa* or a *mala* is a *dhatu* in its normal state (I.P. Singh 122).

### ***Kriyakala***

*Dosas* and *malas* are transported through the body by a system of channels, or *nadi* (R.H. Singh 149). If these channels become blocked by an excess or stagnation of *malas*, the elements cannot flow freely, causing further stagnation and disease (R.H. Singh 149). Thus, early diagnosis and intervention is a fundamental philosophy in Ayurveda. There are six stages to the pathogenesis of disease (*satkriyakala*), each of which mark opportune times for intervention (R.H. Singh 135):

- *Sancaya* is the buildup of *dosas* in their normal sites – *vata* in the bones, *pitta* in the blood, *kapha* in the lymph and muscles (Gopinath 104). Symptoms felt at this stage are those of the increased *dosa*, not of any disease.
- *Prakopa* is aggravation (usually called vitiation) of the *dosas*. At this point the *dosas* become abnormal, but the damage is still reversible.
- *Prasara* is the spread of the vitiated *dosas* outside their normal sites. Unless the causative agent is removed immediately, this is usually the point where pathogenesis becomes irreversible.
- *Sthanasamsraya* is the localization of the vitiated *dosas* to a weak site in the body. This allows the vitiated *dosa* to interact with the surrounding *dhatu*s, which produces symptoms of a disease for the first time.
- *Vyakti* is the stage where the disease manifests itself fully. The exact disease depends upon which *dosa* is vitiated, with which *dhatu* it is interacting, and to what extent they are mixing.
- *Bheda* is the final stage of disease progression, where the disease is mostly diagnosed by its complications. Treatment of this chronic disease includes dealing with both the main disease and its complications.

There are a variety of different ways to relieve symptoms of disease. These include bloodletting, the use of drugs, and eating foods that either increase or decrease the vitiated *dosa* (Susruta 134, 355) [See R.H. Singh pages 148-155, Susruta, and Govindan for information about treatments].

## References and Related Readings

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<http://www.webmd.com/balance/tc/ayurveda-topic-overview>

[http://www.holisticonline.com/ayurveda/ayv\\_home.htm](http://www.holisticonline.com/ayurveda/ayv_home.htm)

<http://indianmedicine.nic.in/ayurveda.asp>

[http://www.schoolsgalore.com/categories/1/ayurveda\\_schools.html](http://www.schoolsgalore.com/categories/1/ayurveda_schools.html)

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