

# Textbook of Ayurveda

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# Textbook of Ayurveda

## *Fundamental Principles of Ayurveda Volume One*

by  
Vasant D. Lad, M.A.Sc.



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Although the information contained in this book is based on Ayurvedic principles practiced for thousands of years, it should not be taken or construed as standard medical diagnosis or treatment. For any medical condition, always consult with a qualified physician.

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# Table of Contents

- Foreword xv  
Preface xix  
About the Author xxi  
The Use of Sanskrit xxiii
- 1 Shad Darshan, The Six Philosophies of Life | 1**  
Introduction 1  
Sāṅkhya 5  
    *Purusha and Prakṛti* 5  
    *Mahad (Creative Intelligence)* 6  
    *Ahamkāra* 8  
    *Sattva, Rajas, Tamas* 8  
Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika 10  
    *The Four Pramāṇa—Sources of Valid Knowledge* 11  
    *The Elements* 12  
    *Soul (Ātman)* 15  
    *Mind (Manas)* 16  
    *Time (Kālā)* 16  
    *Direction (Dig)* 17  
Mīmāṃsā 18  
Yoga 19  
Vedānta 20  
Buddhism 21
- 2 Universal Attributes and Doshic Theory | 25**  
The Five Elements and Their Attributes 25  
The Five Elements and Tanmātrās 27  
The Basic Attributes of Tridoṣha—Vāta, Pitta, Kapha 29  
Attributes (Gunas) and Their Effects on Doṣhas 30  
Prakṛti: Your Unique Body Type 35  
    *Vikṛti* 36  
    *Characteristics of the Vāta Individual* 39  
    *Characteristics of the Pitta Individual* 39  
    *Characteristics of the Kapha Individual* 40
- 3 The Doṣhas and Their Subtypes | 45**  
Vāta and Its Subtypes 45  
    *Prāna Vāyu* 48  
    *Udāna Vāyu* 50  
    *Samāna Vāyu* 51  
    *Apāna Vāyu* 52  
    *Vyāna Vāyu* 53  
Pitta and Its Subtypes 53  
    *Pāchaka Pitta* 56

*Rañjaka Pitta* 57  
*Sādhaka Pitta* 59  
*Ālochaka Pitta* 63  
*Bhrājaka Pitta* 64  
Kapha and Its Subtypes 65  
*Kledaka Kapha* 68  
*Avalambaka Kapha* 70  
*Bodhaka Kapha* 71  
*Tarpaka Kapha* 74  
*Shleshaka Kapha* 77  
Summary 78

#### 4 **Agni, The Digestive Fire | 81**

Agni, the Digestive Fire 81  
*Agni and the Five Elements* 83  
*The Role of Agni in Digestion* 84  
Normal Functions of Agni 86  
The Doshas and Agni 89  
The Four Varieties of Agni 90  
The 40 Main Types of Agni 92  
*The Subtypes of Agni* 92  
Summary 101

#### 5 **Dhātus, The Seven Bodily Tissues | 103**

Introduction 103  
*Nutrition and Structure of the Dhātus* 104  
*Dhātu By-products* 106  
*Disorders of the Dhātus* 106  
Rasa Dhātu: the Plasma Tissue 107  
*By-products of Rasa Dhātu* 109  
*Disorders of Rasa Dhātu* 110  
*Fever* 111  
*Decreased and Increased Rasa Dhātu* 111  
Rakta Dhātu: the Blood Tissue 113  
*Red Blood Cells* 114  
*By-products of Rakta Dhātu* 116  
*Disorders of Rakta Dhātu* 117  
*The Health of the Blood Vessels* 120  
Māmsa Dhātu: the Muscle Tissue 122  
*Types of Muscles and Their Functions* 124  
*By-products of Māmsa Dhātu* 125  
*Disorders of Māmsa Dhātu* 127  
The Role of Māmsa Dhātu in Emotional Well Being 129  
*Meditation and Māmsa Dhātu* 130  
Meda Dhātu: the Fat Tissue 132  
*By-products of Meda Dhātu* 134  
*Disorders of Meda Dhātu* 135



*Awareness and Meda* 142

Asthi Dhātu: the Bone Tissue 144  
*By-products of Asthi Dhātu* 145  
*Disorders of Asthi Dhātu* 147

Majjā Dhātu: the Nerve Tissue and Bone Marrow 151  
*Majjā and the Prenatal Development Stage* 152  
*The Functions of Majjā Dhātu* 155  
*By-products of Majjā Dhātu* 161  
*Dreams* 161  
*Disorders of Majjā Dhātu* 162

Shukra and Ārtava Dhātus: Male and Female Reproductive Tissues 168  
*By-products of Shukra and Ārtava Dhātus* 169

Shukra Dhātu 169  
Ārtava Dhātu 172  
*Disorders of Shukra/Ārtava Dhātus* 174

Conclusion 175

**6 Srotāmsi, The Bodily Channels and Systems | 177**

Introduction 177

Sroto Dushti 180

The Channels to Receive: Food, Prāna, Water 181  
*Anna Vaha Srotas: The Channel of Food* 181  
*Prāna Vaha Srotas: The Respiratory Channel* 183  
*Ambu Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Water* 184

The Channels to Nourish and Maintain the Body: The Dhātu Srotāmsi 185  
*Rasa Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Plasma* 185  
*Rakta Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Blood* 186  
*Māmsa Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Muscle* 186  
*Meda Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Fat* 186  
*Asthi Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Bone* 187  
*Majjā Vaha Srotas: The Channel for the Nerves and Bone Marrow* 188  
*Shukra/Ārtava Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Reproductive Tissue* 188  
*Rajah Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Menstruation* 189  
*Stanya Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Lactation* 189

Channels of Elimination: Feces, Urine, Sweat 189  
*Purisha Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Feces* 189  
*Mūtra Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Urine* 191  
*Sveda Vaha Srotas: The Channel for Sweat* 192

Mano Vaha Srotas: The Channel of the Mind 193  
*States of Mind* 193  
*Manifestations of the Mind* 194  
*Chakras, Koshas, and the Mind* 195  
*Perception, Awareness, and the Mind* 197  
*Individual Mind and Universal Mind* 198  
*Mind in the Lower Three Chakras* 200  
*Heart Chakra: Bridge to Higher Consciousness* 200  
*The Mind and the Higher Three Chakras* 201

States of Awareness 202  
    *The Universality of Mind* 202  
    *Disorders of Mano Vaha Srotas* 203  
    *Witnessing Awareness* 204  
Conclusion 205

## 7 Ojas, Tejas, Prāna | 207

Ojas 208  
    *Inferior and Superior Ojas* 210  
    *Disorders of Ojas* 213  
    *Causes of Disorders of Ojas* 215  
Tejas 216  
    *Qualities of Tejas* 217  
    *Manifestations of Tejas* 220  
    *Tejas and Karma* 221  
    *Tejas and Kundalinī* 223  
Prāna 224  
The Functional Integrity of Prāna, Tejas, and Ojas 228  
Soma 229  
Awareness 231

## 8 Digestion and Nutrition | 235

Rasa (Taste) 235  
    *How Taste Relates to the Elements* 236  
    *Relation of Rasa to Tongue and Organs* 237  
Pharmacological and Psychological Actions of the Six Tastes 238  
    *Sweet* 238  
    *Sour* 240  
    *Salty* 241  
    *Pungent* 242  
    *Bitter* 243  
    *Astringent* 244  
    *Cravings* 246  
Vīrya (Potent Energy) 246  
Vipāka (Post-Digestive Effect) 248  
Prabhāva (Unique, Specific Action) 249  
    *Actions of Rasa, Vīrya, Vipāka, and Prabhāva* 250  
Digestion 251  
    *The Stages of Digestion* 252  
How to Eat a Balanced Diet 258  
    *Nutritional Disorders* 259  
Food Combining 260  
The Three Laws of Nutrition 261  
    *Nutrition Begins at Conception* 263  
Cellular Metabolism (Pīlu Pāka) 265  
    *Pīlu Pāka and Pithara Pāka* 266  
    *Desire* 268





*Thoughts, Feelings, and Emotions* 270  
Conclusion 273

**9 Conclusion | 275**  
The Āyurvedic Definition of Health 275  
The Doshas 276  
*The Interactions of the Doshas* 277  
Factors That Affect Our Health 278  
*Choosing a Balanced Lifestyle* 279  
*Relationships, Emotions, and Meditation* 279  
*Behavioral Medicine* 280

**Appendix | 283**

**Glossary | 295**

**Bibliography and Selected Readings | 311**

**Acknowledgements | 313**

**Index | 315**



# List of Tables

Shad Darshan: The Six Philosophies of Life	4
The Elements and Associated Types of Energy	14
The Senses and the Elements	27
The 20 Attributes and Their Relation ship to the Tridosha	31
The Attributes of the Vāta Individual	42
The Attributes of the Pitta Individual	43
The Attributes of the Kapha Individual	44
The Subtypes of Vāta	46
The Subtypes of Pitta	55
The Subtypes of Kapha	68
The Four Varieties of Agni	92
The Amino Acids and 20 Gunas	98
The Seven Dhātus	104
Signs and Symptoms of Rasa Disorders	110
Signs and Symptoms of Rakta Disorders	118
Blood Types Correlated to the Doshas	120
Signs and Symptoms of Māmsa Disorders	129
Signs and Symptoms of Meda Disorders	137
Signs and Symptoms of Asthi Disorders	149
Signs and Symptoms of Majjā Disorders	167
Signs and Symptoms of Shukra and Ārtava Disorders	174
Four Types of Sroto Dushti	180
The Chakras and the Koshas	196
Functions of Tejas	216
Five Elements and Foods	236
Taste and the Five Elements	237
Tastes and Their Related Organs	238
Effects of Tastes on the Doshas	245
Functions and Effects of Vīrya	247
Effects of Rasa and Vipāka on the Doshas	249
Digestion: Fields of Experience and Action	251
Examples of Attributes of Certain Foods	258
The Twenty Attributes (Gunas) and Their Effects on the Doshas	283
The Seven Bodily Tissues (Sapta Dhātu)	284
The 40 Main Types of Agni	285

Disorders of Ojas, Tejas, and Prāna	287
Srotāmsi, the Systems and Channels of the Body	288
Relationship of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas to Foods and Behavior	290
Food Guidelines for Basic Constitutional Types	291



# 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, avyakta—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**

<b>Jñānendriya</b> (Sensory Faculties)	<b>Sensory Organs</b>	<b>Karmendriya</b> (Faculties of Action)	<b>Motor Organs</b>	<b>Tanmātrās</b> (Objects of the Senses)	<b>Maha Bhūtas</b> (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, Prakṛiti. 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,<sup>10</sup> 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.

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10. 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,