

## Archives



### Ayurveda: Dawn in the West

By Sonam Targee

Ayur – veda ~ lit. “life science”

The ancient medicine of India. Like ancient Greek medicine, Ayurveda is based on a system of “humours” or constitutional types; the precursor to modern genetics.

The idea of having a “type” is one way of answering the questions: Why is a person prone to dryness (dry skin, dry eyes, dry mucosa) and another person prone to dampness (swelling, edema, congestion)? Or why is one person subject to heat (rashes, inflammation, anger, frequent infections) and another prone to cold (low appetite, cold hands, cold feet, fear)? Thus knowing your own constitutional type is a key to knowing what your innate tendencies are, how to promote your strengths, and prevent diseases arising from your weaknesses.

Ayurveda is also akin to Chinese medicine; they both posit a five-element theory, or five stages of transformation in Nature. These two ancient literary traditions have sometimes communicated well – over the Silk Road – and sometimes they have not communicated well at all, depending on the degree of isolationist policies of the prevailing dynasty\*. The five elements of Ayurveda can be seen through the eyes of the western bio-medical model quite easily:

1. **Earth element:** matter in it’s solid form
2. **Water element:** matter in it’s liquid form
3. **Air element:** matter in it’s form of vapor
4. **Fire element:** the presence or absence of HEAT
5. **Ether element:** The concept of space in that even the most dense earth element object has to take up a certain amount of space

Examples of these elements in the body are the concept of ‘structure’ for earth element (the cell walls), the concept of ‘fluids’ for the water element (the cytoplasm), the idea of ‘metabolism’ for the fire element (enzymes), the idea of ‘movement’ for the air element (transportation), and the idea of ‘space’ for the ether element (synaptic space, thoracic space, etc.). If one of these factors starts to accumulate out of normal ground of homeostasis (check and balances) in the body due to excesses in diet, lifestyle, exercise, or emotion, then the disease process starts.

This means that all of nature contains the qualities of the Five Elements and that we can definitely overdo it with one of these qualities. Let’s examine two examples in food. Ice cream is damp and cold. Cayenne pepper is hot and dry. It’s easy to see how too much ice cream might promote dampness in the body resulting in sinus congestion for instance. Likewise, it’s easy to see how too much cayenne pepper can promote heat in the body resulting in burning sensations. Now let’s examine two examples in exercise. It’s easy to see how no exercise is stagnating, cool and damp potentially resulting in weight gain, sluggish metabolism, and poor circulation. On the other hand it’s easy to see how too much exercise is over stimulating, warming and drying, potentially resulting in hyperactivity, sensations of flushing, and dry joints.

What Ayurveda is saying here is that we live in symbiosis with all of nature, and that if we learn more about our own nature we can live in greater harmony with ourselves, others, and the whole universe. “Know Thyself”. In this way we can learn to manage our constitutional type, stay healthy and live a long life.

Why stay healthy and live a long life? Not just so we can experience pleasure, avoid pain, and indulge our desires (although these are definitely possible!), but because we can serve others for a longer time, giving rise to the birth of loving kindness and compassion in our hearts. In a body, we also have an opportunity for grounded spiritual development, which is not necessarily available to us as purely mental beings (formless spirits).

Staying in balance with these 5 great qualities also allows us to avoid all kinds of confusion and neurosis mentally – the fear, anxiety, worry of excess air and ether (space), the dullness, greed and attachment of excess earth and water, and the envy, jealousy and anger of excess fire.

In future articles for Nature’s Wisdom on Ayurveda, we will get more specific about diet, lifestyle, exercise, and emotions; how to recognize your own type, and how to find moderation in adjusting all the variables. In the meantime contemplate the Five Element Theory, perhaps read Dr. Vasant Lad’s book “Ayurveda – The Science of Life”, and get an idea of where excesses might be for yourself. This ancient science is so relevant to us now because of all the extreme qualities we are exposed to such as: frenetic fast paced movement (air/ether), a glut of information to process (fire), and an attitude of apathy, dullness, and powerlessness (water/earth).

Some of the many gifts of Ayurveda are understanding, diagnosing, and treating these modern difficulties in light of ancient profound spiritual knowledge. This is the reason I am so excited about Ayurveda’s “Dawn in the West”.

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\*See the book “Tao and Dharma” by Robert Svaboda and Arnie Lad