

Session 1: Earth

The world was once thought to be composed of the four basic elements of earth, water, fire and air. Although modern western chemistry has defined many more elements than these original basic four, they still maintain a powerful symbolism and possess a strong correspondence to internal states and emotions. Early beliefs stated that the four elements were related to the four humours in the organic world through the principles of moist, dry, cold and hot. The combination of these principles produces the elements in the inorganic world and the humours in the organic world:

Hot + dry: cholera (anger) and fire

Hot + moist: blood and air

Cold + moist: phlegm and water

Cold + dry: melancholy and earth

In Ayurvedic medicine (popular in the Eastern world) the three constitutions (Vata, Pitta and Kapha) are based on these elements and humours. Yoga and Ayurveda, which both take their roots from the Eastern Samkhya philosophy, add a fifth element that contains all the others: Ether or Space. This links to the concept of space/time as described in quantum physics.

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Earth is symbolised by the image of the Earth Mother which is a universal symbol for fecundity, inexhaustible creativity and sustenance. The element earth represents the feminine and passive or the Yin of Chinese symbolism and is traditionally portrayed geometrically by a square or cube and visually with the colours brown, black or yellow. Its qualities are cold in opposition to the heat of fire and steady, solid and unmoving in opposition to fire's constant movement.

Earth represents solidity and structure. It relates to the framework of the body - the bones and the muscles. In yoga asanas (physical postures), this is where we begin: we get the basic shape of the pose, and then begin to refine our alignment to make the structure more stable and less subject to strain. The earth aspect of a pose is its foundation, that part of the body that is touching the floor. When we are pressing our feet into the floor in Tadasana (Mountain pose) or press our hands firmly into the mat in Downward Facing Dog pose, we are expressing the earth element.

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In Ayurveda, Earth is one of the elements that is part of the kapha constitution, which, in its positive aspect, represents solidity, stability and caring qualities; and in its negative aspect, dullness and passivity. Heaviness and connection are the key qualities and is a positive aspect as it relates to gravity.

Gravity is attracting us to the centre of the earth, just like the earth is attracted to the sun. Without gravity there would be no universe. As there is gravity there is also anti-gravity, and this creates movement. In our body our spine allows this movement to happen: it keeps our body together and all our movements are organised around the mobility of our spine. Vanda Scaravelli tells us that we collect energy from the ground by grasping the gravity of the earth. This connection allows us to expand not only vertically, but also at horizontal level, all around, like the branches of a tree: extending, bending forwards, backwards and sideways. We get our energy from the soil like plants and trees the other part is given by air, water and the sun (Awakening the spine, V. Scaravelli).

Each thing - each stone, blossom, child - is held in place. This is what things can teach us: to fall, patiently to trust our heaviness; even a bird has to do that before it can fly. (R. Maria Rilke, The book of hours)

