

## THE FIVE ELEMENTS

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 and moist: blood and air

Cold and moist: phlegm and water

Cold and 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 Samkya 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.

### Part 1: Earth

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.

In Ayurveda, Earth is one of the element 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 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).</|>

### Part 2: Water

Whereas earth symbolises the embodiment of form, the mass, the structure; water symbolises the dissolution of this form. Water disintegrates, abolishes forms. This fluidity quality has given water a

symbolism of potentialities, which are yet to be manifested. So water symbolises the dissolution of forms into a mass of possibilities.

The unique property of water is to take the shape of that which surrounds it. It does not have a specific shape by itself. Water finds the path of least resistance. However, if it forces its way, it smoothes everything along its path, and bit by bit changes the landscape. A true lesson in patience. Water sequences boost the immune system and bring about changes through fluid movements.

Water takes the shape of any vessel. This soft, transparent and yielding quality allows for outside things to show themselves: empty your mind of thoughts, feelings; be formless but whole, fearless and soft. When water is completely still, you cannot see what is under the surface; instead you see your reflection.

Water also defies gravity. In our bodies it moves up with the blood; in plants it helps seeds to grow up away from the earth. Water is associated with the principle of “moisture”, and the circulatory movement of the blood and sap as life within vegetation and animals. Water is the binding of all other elements. Blood, lymph and other fluids move between our cells and through our vessels bringing energy, carrying away wastes, regulating temperature, bringing disease fighters and carrying hormonal information from one area to the other.

Water is also associated with the water of the womb where individual life comes from, and from the water of oceans where human life evolves from. It purifies, washes away (“sins”) and regenerates. These aspects of water relate to birth, death and regeneration.

Water always come back to being water, no matter how or what changes it. It is the only natural substance that is found in all three physical states: liquid, solid and gas. Water changes to steam, then back into water, water to ice to water: water is always water. In that sense it symbolises persistence and integrity. We should always come back to our true Self, our centre, our truth, no matter what changes we go through.

Finally water is expressive: stormy seas are the reflections of our anger, soft rain reflects our tenderness.

Water corresponds to the internal organs of the body. If the earth element of the musculo-skeletal system is the container, the water element of the organic body is its content. The qualities of water element are weight combined with fluidity and adaptability. In Yoga postures, as the outer forms of the postures become familiar, we can begin to sense movements within the stillness of the form. The movement of breath, circulation, heartbeat and digestion are all rhythmic expressions of the organic body. When we experience ourselves being firm but not rigid, receptive and soft but not collapsed, we are balancing the elements of earth and water.

Mudra of water: Varuna mudra: Little finger and them together, other fingers extended.

Water is linked to Kapha and Pitta constitutions in Ayurveda. The qualities of the element water are: liquidity, moist, cool, heavy, soft, mobile and slimy; and its functions are lubrication, softness, pleasantness. The sense of taste is related to water.

### **Part 3: Air**

We have moved from the solidity of Earth to the adaptability and fluidity of water. Now we come to the Air element, which expresses lightness and movement. The air element connects our breathing to the circulation of Prana, or life force through the body. At a subtle level, the air element relates to the discriminatory aspect of the mind, the intelligence known as buddhi. This intelligence lets us make distinctions and value judgements, supporting our choices in life based on wisdom and rationality rather than impulses or desires.

In our Yoga practice, the air element helps us to refine our postures and apply our mind to “observe things accurately” (Desikachar). We learn to be able to move swiftly, and in a calm manner at the same time, to discern ways to move towards the right alignment through effortless steps and techniques.

Earth and water are passive elements. Earth symbolises strength and stamina. Water is fluid and highly adaptable and moves only according to the container it is in and takes its shape. However, both earth and water combined can become excessively heavy, stagnant, lethargic and block Prana, the life force, the energy. So we need the element air for movement. It is an active element together with fire: it is a dynamic and energising element. In spring especially, we need to create warmth and circulation in the body to counterbalance heaviness, the stagnant and cold aspect of winter. Spring is the season for the air element, before the heat of the summer.

The traditional belief within symbology is that air is the primary element. There are two major ideas related to the element of air. One is the idea of breath and breathing and the other is the idea of wind. Whereas breath involves air on a personal level, wind involves air on a cosmic level symbolising the spirit and the vital breath of the universe. Wind is essentially air in motion or air in its more active state. The two movements of breathing - the intaking and outgoing of the breath - symbolise the alternating rhythm of life and death, of manifestation and reabsorption into the universe. It is the reason why Yoga exercises place particular emphasis on breathing.

Air is linked to the Vata constitution in Ayurveda. The qualities of Vata are: dry, subtle, light, rough, cool; and its functions are dryness, lightness, transparency. The sense of touch is related to air. So its organs is the skin. It is linked to movement-linked/vital process in the body such as circulation of the blood, digestion, and renewal of cells.

Mudra of air: vayu mudra: keep index finger on the base of the thumb and press with the thumb keeping the other fingers straight. It prevents diseases due to imbalances in air and relieves rheumatism, arthritis, gout, cervical spondylitis (linked to dryness and degeneration); also relieves gas pressure in the stomach (winds).

#### **Part 4: Fire**

In his book, Bachelard makes this point about this unique "liveness" of fire:

<|>"It is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substance and offers itself with the warmth of love. Or it can go back down into the substance and hide there, latent and pent-up, like hate and vengeance."</|>

Fire has an hypnotic effect: "...the reverie in front of the fire, the gentle reverie that is conscious of its well-being, is the most naturally centred reverie". Fire and heat have been used to symbolise human emotions and particularly emotions associated with sexual power. This association can be seen in popular cliches such as "they warmed up to each other" or "she gave him a cold shoulder" or in "the heat of passion."

However, amongst the basic elements Fire has been called the "ultra-living element." Traditionally, fire has represented the active and masculine or the Yang of Chinese symbolism. Its major symbolism is related to the sun and the powers of transformation and purification. Deserts, which are represented by fire, have traditionally been associated with purification. The colours of fire are the advancing colours of red and orange and the aspects of fire are flames and rays. Whereas water has different states related to movement or rest, fire is always moving (like the element air: there is no fire without air), and consuming. So fire is related to the process of change. However, it is not related to slow change, as for water and earth, but to quick change. So fire is the transformative element "par excellence", the engine of all processes.

According to Ayurveda, the location of Fire in the body is the small intestine, where food is transformed into energy. From the small intestine, toxic wastes are then directed into the big intestine to be eliminated. Fire is also related to the brain and the nervous system, and to the mind and emotions, known as manas. The energy created by food generates the impulses of nervous reactions, our feelings, and even our thought processes. Our thoughts move like electric current along our nerves.

Fire or Agni is the fire of the kundalini energy. Agni burns our Karmas, our blocks, our fears. It gives us the strength of commitment, discipline, willpower and the ability to carry out our intentions (This is Tapas: fiery discipline). Through the proper use of this element, we learn to fully digest the experiences we get from life. The intention with which we will practise our session is to generate this internal Fire to boost immunity and maintain vitality.

Pitta is the Ayurvedic constitution associated with Fire. Vision and colour are the related senses, and its qualities are sharpness/brightness, heat (temperature), dryness, light, clarity and subtleness. Its functions are linked to digestion, complexion, vision and metabolism.

The Mudra for Fire/heat is the Linga Mudra (see image above): Encircle the left thumb with the thumb and index finger of the right hand. Then interlock the fingers of both hands and keep the thumb of the left hand vertically straight. It generates heat in the body. It is said that it stops the production of Phlegm and gives power to the lungs. It relieves cold and bronchial infections and invigorates the body generally. (From "Technology of consciousness: healing practice of Mudras", HealthEqualsHappiness.com).

## Part 5, Ether

Each of the 5 elements is associated with one of the 5 senses, and act as a medium for experiencing sensations. The grossest element, Earth, was created using all the other elements, and therefore can be perceived by all 5 senses: hearing, touch, taste, smell and sight. The next element, water, has no odour but can be seen, tasted, heard and felt. Air can be heard and felt. Next comes fire, which can be seen, heard and felt. Finally, Ether, although the medium of sound, is inaccessible to all other senses. As such it is considered as the most subtle, the most "mysterious" of all the elements. Hindus believe that it has been used to create the other four traditional elements. Each element is used to create the next, each less subtle than the last.

Different civilisations have variations on what the basic elements are. Greek, Indus, Jainism and Buddhism have the same 5 basic elements. Medieval alchemists counted Sulphur, Mercury and Salt as extra elements. The Chinese have water, fire and earth; but then see metal and wood as the other two basic elements. The Japanese have Air, Water, Fire and Void.

Aether, Ether or, in medieval terms, quintessence, is the material that filled the region of the universe above the terrestrial sphere. The concept of Ether was used in several theories to explain phenomena, such as the traveling of light and gravity. In Greek mythology, it was thought to be the pure essence that the gods breathed, filling the space where they lived, analogous to the air breathed by the mortals. The medieval concept of Ether was that it filled the outer spheres, which contained the celestial bodies. They gave it a divine quality and related it to our inner-self at a subtle level.

So Ether is not quite the same as "space", in the sense that it is not a vacuum. The fact that our senses cannot perceive it directly does not make it a void. Space is the container or womb of all existence and its constituent, Ether, relates to consciousness and to sound. We know from modern science that all matter is 99.999% space, with infinitesimal particles or waves moving in ever-changing relationships. In the 18th Century, theories stated that space, permeated by Ether, contained "excessively small whirlpools", allowing for Ether to have a certain elasticity, transmitting vibrations from light and sound as they traveled through. Newton linked it to gravity. These views contributed to Einstein's theory of relativity.

Ether is omnipresent and is the primordial element and expressed itself through vibrations: this is why sound and the ear are associated to it.

Connecting to the space element helps us to recognise that everything is in constant flux - open to change and new possibilities. The space element support us to practise yoga (unity) in connection to a higher purpose, more “universal”, and to move beyond our human limitations, whether physical or mental.

In Ayurveda, Akasha/Space is linked to Vata (together with air). The object of perception is sound and vibrations. Its qualities are subtle, light, clear, spreads quickly. Its functions are lightness, porosity (it infiltrates everything), the infinitesimally small.

Chin mudra is the hand movement that is linked to Ether, as it links our inner- self to the universe. Our body-mind is the microcosmic version of the universe. The intention with which we are going to practise this sequence is to maintain a sense of balance and calm, to create a sense of unity between body and mind, as well as with the rest of the universe.