

## PANCHTATVAS AND HUMAN WELLBEING

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### **Abstract**

Health and happiness are the very *raison d'être* of all human endeavors, which in turn enable success in other pursuits. While modern science has played a commendable role in reining in various contagious and accident-based ailments, modern lifestyle has opened the floodgates for myriad lifestyle disorders. Ways of preventing the same as well as lasting solutions in treating them are large to be found in the ancient practices, which are today either labeled as alternative medicines or superstitions. These range from Ayurved, Homeopathy, ancient Chinese medicine, acupressure, acupuncture, and Yogasanas to meditation at various levels under Ashtang Yog, sound vibrations via Mantras, connecting with the elements in nature, reiki, prayer and practices that impact the subtle through the physical. Humans and all other beings are made up of the five basic elements in nature, a fact which is vouched by modern science and which has been stated ages ago in the ancient holistic sciences. The latter also rightly added the important subtle energy dimension to the same, which is slowly finding acceptance in modern research as well. While the methods of working on the all-pervading subtle energy that sustains all beings may vary, the end objective of tapping into the very source of our existence is to ensure holistic and lasting health and is perhaps the only sustainable method of achieving and maintaining the well-being of the individual, the society and the planet.

**Keywords:** Shaastras, Panchtatvas, Panchmahabhutas, elements, consciousness, cosmic, energy, health, balance, Tridosh, healing

### **Introduction**

Modern science explains the interplay of the five basic elements of space, air, fire, water, and earth in the world of nature. India's ancient Shaastras (holistic sciences) refer to them as Akash, Vayu, Agni, Jal, and Pruthvi, respectively. The Rushis (ancient scientists working in the physical and spiritual realms) have described the evolution of the primordial cosmic energy (Prakruti) from the pure cosmic consciousness (Parameshwar, Paramatma, or Parabrahma), which in turn manifests through the Panchmahabhutas (Panchtatvas or five basic elements) and the Trigunas (three human tendencies). Panchtatvas are the gross forms, while their subtle forms are the Tanmatras. (1) These in turn are represented in humans and other beings in the form of the five sense organs and their

perceptions. The Tattvas also merge in various combinations to form the Tridoshas (three bodily tendencies) of Vaat, Kaph, and Pitta. (2)

The Vedic sciences have asserted the inherent commonality between the microcosm and the macrocosm, described as Pind and Brahmand (3), respectively. Thus, the effects of thoughts and actions at the individual level reverberate across the universe and conversely, the impact of cosmic phenomena is felt at the individual level. This paper endeavors to explain the interplay of Panchtatvas and their relationship with human well-being both, at the physical and psychological levels, which in turn has ramifications on human society and the planet as a whole.

Everybody faces myriad stresses while living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a result, people are plagued with a range of imbalances ranging from small health issues to major illnesses. Many times, the fancy tag of ‘changing lifestyles’ is attached to this state of affairs and people end up in a lifelong dependence on medicines. The paper aims to highlight the significance of ensuring equilibrium in the elements present in the body so that holistic health can be maintained or regained.

### **Panchtatvas**

Tatva in Sanskrit means a rule or a concept. Vedic sciences look at the five basic elements at a much deeper level rather than as mere physical material. These Tatvas and the subtle energies that they represent form the very basis of the manifest nature. These five great forces are collectively known as Panchtatvas or Panchmahabhutas (4), reflecting their vast and all-encompassing nature. Bhut is something that exists in physical form or as the eternal subtle essence. Since the basic elements are the building blocks of all beings, they are described as Mahabhutas. The ongoing phenomena of creation, maintenance, and destruction or overhaul observed in nature take place through the interplay of Panchtatvas as governed by the three forms of cosmic consciousness, viz. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiv, respectively, in coordination with the three forms of primordial energy, viz. Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati, respectively. This continuous modification is visible through the changes taking place in nature.

The universe is full of the Panchtatvas and their underlying subtle energies are known as Tanmatras according to the Samkhya school of Vedic philosophy. (5) The qualities of the Panchtatvas at the gross level are shape, mobility, heat, flow, and stability respectively, and at the subtle level, their qualities are represented by sound (Shabd), touch (Sparsh), form (Roop), taste (Ras) and smell (Gandh), respectively. Akashtatva is formed from the subtle element (Tanmatra) of Shabd. Vayutatva is created from the two subtle elements of Shabd and Sparsh. Agnitatva manifests from Shabd, Sparsh, and Roop. Jaltatva is formed from Shabd, Sparsh, Roop, and Ras, while Pruthvitatva manifests from Shabd, Sparsh, Roop, Ras, and Gandh. (6)

The changes taking place in living and non-living things are a result of the transformation happening in the elements through unlimited permutations and combinations. According to

Taittiriya Upanishad, the entire manifest world is made up of the Panchtatvas, which are all-pervading in energy form. (7) According to the science explained in Vedant, every element is made up of 50% of its own properties and 12.5% of each of the other four elements. (8) Energy can neither be created nor destroyed, but just transformed. As the proportion of an element changes, its structure in nature undergoes a change.

For instance, as the fire element in water increases, its inherent water element reduces and it gets converted into a gaseous form (vapour). Conversely, as the fire element in water decreases, the earth element in it increases and it gets transformed into ice. Again, as the water element in vapor increases, and as the fire element in ice increases, they get converted back into the water. This beautiful explanation in the realm of subtle energy aptly describes the science behind the water cycle experienced in nature.

### **Manifestations in the human body**

Panchtatvas are also responsible for all the changes taking place in the human body. These elements undergo a change in line with the changes taking place in the environment. For instance, the fire element increases after sunrise and the water element reduces. This means that Jaltatva gets converted into Agnitatva. Naturally, the fire element in the human body and in everything else rises. Since the energies of the elements are present everywhere they have an impact on all beings. The emotions in the mind, which make up one's attitude, are also dependent upon the elements. Inflammatory thoughts represent fire, while unstable thoughts represent air. Similarly, sensitive thoughts denote the water element, while self-confidence denotes the earth element. A peaceful temperament indicates space element.

The body gets these elements through food as well as in subtle energy form. Any imbalance due to any reason leads to disease. Ears, skin, eyes, tongue, and nose are associated with the Panchtatvas and the five tanmatras (sound, touch, form, taste, and smell respectively). (9) The five elements in their energy forms are constantly moving through the subtle body.

**1. Pruthvitatva:** The solid and hard aspects in the world of nature are primarily made up of this element. The same applies to the human body. All hard parts of the body such as bones, joints, ligaments, hair, teeth, skin, cartilage, the outer layer of cells, hollow organs, flesh, the outer layer of veins and arteries, nerves, etc,<sup>10</sup> are primarily made up of Pruthvitatva. Similarly, this element plays a major role in the formation of muscles, fat the spinal cord, and semen. This element plays the role of providing strength and continuity to all the hard formations, which are the support structure of the body. At the same time, a balance in the other four elements is also necessary.

**2. Jaltatva:** The subtle energy stored in the body in the form of Ojas manifests in the form of Kaph, which is derived from water and earth elements. This provides basic nutrition to the body. Water is the protective element in the body. It protects the body from depletion in the Akashtatva,

turbulence, speed in the Vayutatva, and heat of the Agnitatva. Any kind of inflammation, burning sensation, or pain in the body is pacified by Jaltatva. There are five types of Kaph (Jal + Pruthvi) in the body. Sperms, eggs, blood, saliva, urine, and sweat are controlled by Jaltatva. (11)

- **Avalambak Kaph:** This Kaph resides in the chest and keeps the entire respiratory system moist and lubricated.
- **Kledak Kaph:** This Kaph moistens the hard or heavy food stuff that reaches the stomach. It also aids in digestion by protecting the slimy lining of the stomach from acids.
- **Bodhak Kaph:** This Kaph is the saliva and aids in knowing the taste and in digestion.
- **Tarpak Kaph:** This Kaph is located in the head and nurtures the organs of perception and protects the nerves in the brain.
- **Shleshak Kaph:** This Kaph located in the joints provides them with lubrication and strength. It also protects the joints from friction. (12)

**3. Agnitatva:** Every cell in the body has Agni residing in it. The Pitta in the body is formed from fire and water elements. Tejas or the internal subtle glow is derived from Agni. According to Ayurveda, Agni is an important component involved in digestion and metabolism. It performs the functions of digesting and absorbing the food ingested and converting it into energy. Agni is responsible for all the important aspects of the body including nutrition, strength, desire, skin tone, will to live, health, Ojas, Tejas, and Pran (subtle life energy). Hunger, thirst, lethargy, sleep, and sex are also controlled by Agnitatva.

Rushi Charak mentioned that when the Agni in the body is in equilibrium, then the person lives a healthy, long, and happy life. If it gets imbalanced, diseases occur. When the function of Agni completely ceases, a person dies. (13) He described 13 types of Agni in the human body. They include the Jatharagni, seven types of Dhatvagni, and five types of Bhutagni.

- **Jatharagni:** It is located in the stomach and lower gut and it enables the digestion of the food ingested and metabolism.
- **Dhatvagni:** Food digested by Jatharagni is transformed into the substance of the Sapt Dhatus (seven fundamental principles of the body structure). Dhatvagni converts that into the seven Dhatus (Ras, Rakt, Mams, Med, Asthi, Majja, and Shukra).
- **Bhutagni:** This Agni, also described as Bhaumagni / Parthivagni, Apyagni, Agnyagni, Vayavyagni, and Nabhasagni, further converts the food transformed into Sapt Dhatus into Panchmahabhutas. (14,15)

**4. Vayutatva:** The life-sustaining energy of Pran is derived from air and space elements. Transporting is the main function of Vayu. When it flows freely through the Nadis (channels for the movement of cosmic consciousness in the subtle body), it provides nutrition, energy, motility, and comprehensive health to all parts of the body including muscles, nerves, cells, and other organs. Movement, contraction, expansion, and contraception are controlled by Vayutatva. There are five types of Pranas (Vayu+Akash) in the body. (16)

- **Pran:** This is the flow of energy active in the region of the chest. It enables the functioning of the heart and lungs.
- **Apan:** This flow of energy is active below the navel in the region of the lower abdomen. It provides energy to the large intestine, kidney, anus, and reproductive organs.
- **Saman:** This energy flow is active in the region between the heart and navel. It energizes the liver, intestines, pancreas, and stomach.
- **Udan:** This flow of energy is active in the region of the head and mind. It activates the sense organs of the eyes, tongue, nose, and ears.
- **Vyan:** This energy flow pervades the entire body. Its main functions are regulating the movements of the body, coordinating with other Pranas, and strengthening them. (17)

5. **Akashtatva:** This is the all-pervading element. It permeates everything and is boundless. Space is steady because it does not have the restlessness associated with Vayu. It is cold since it does not have the heat of Agni, and is light because it is devoid of the weight of Jal and Pruthvi. However, since other elements emerge from Akashtatva, it is the basis of them all. The other Tatvas are present in Akash in dormant form. Desire, anger, greed, and fear are controlled by Akashtatva. (18)

### The energy of the Tatvas & health

As mentioned earlier, most of the ailments plaguing people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are a result of wrong lifestyles and disconnect with nature and the eternal cosmic principles that make us, and the stress that arises out of it. The stresses faced by people range from the ones at the workplace to those in their personal life. But, in the process, people are slowly becoming emotionally unstable. In the present times, even schoolchildren are often said to be under stress, which is true in some cases. Once the dependence on medicines arises, people end up ingesting them for a lifetime. One soon gets caught in this vicious cycle of medicines and ends up losing the body's inherent immunity. Moreover, after a few years, the side effects begin to manifest, which in turn lead to new diseases or disorders.

Since humans are made up of the Panchtatvas, the best solutions to most ailments can also be found in the same. For instance, if a particular application on the computer or the mobile is malfunctioning, rectifying the problems that have arisen in its software program would fix the issue. The same applies in the case of human ailments and the Panchtatvas. Thus, nature is the ultimate healer of which man is an integral part. Working in the energy plane, which represents the subtle forms of Panchtatvas, gives access to the very source of the problems that are visible at the physical level. Let us take a quick look at some examples of the way this works.

Bones, ligaments, cartilages, hair, teeth, and the outer covering of cells and vessels in the body primarily represent the Pruthvitatva. Similarly, muscles and fat also represent it to a large extent. Muscles also represent the Jaltatva to a lesser extent. When the Agnitatva in the body increases for

some reason, the water element in the muscles reduces and gets converted into air element. This change leads to the hardening of the muscles. Ensuring proper ingestion and excretion enables a balance in the Pruthvitatva. Similarly, maintaining a balance in the subtle energy of Pruthvitatva will rectify the kind of problems mentioned above.

All the fluids in the body such as blood, urine, sweat, saliva, semen, and lubrication in the joints represent the Jaltatva. As seen earlier it manifests as five kinds of Kaph in the body. An imbalance in the same leads to circulatory problems, digestive disorders, joint pain, and emotional stress. Ensuring its equilibrium by working on its subtle energy in turn ensures the smooth functioning of the above systems.

We have already seen that Agnitatva is present in the body in the form of Jatharagni, Dhatvagni, and Bhutagni. An imbalance in this Tatva leads to various diseases. A strong Jatharagni results in strong Dhatvagnis, while if the former is weak, it manifests into weakness in the latter. Weak Agnitatva leads to the accumulation of undigested toxins. Thus, a strong Jatharagni ensures good digestion, which in turn ensures that the Dhatvagnis and Bhutagnis function properly. Working on the subtle energy of Agnitatva ensures that the above functions continue unhindered.

As seen earlier, Vayutatva exists all across the body in the form of five main types of Pranas (life-sustaining forces) and several other minor forms. An imbalance in any of these forms leads to diseases of the organs that fall within their respective jurisdiction, while a balance ensures their smooth functioning. An imbalance basically affects the digestive system, which then manifests in other defects of the body and mind. Working on the subtle energy of Vayutatva ensures that all organs and systems get the life-sustaining force in adequate measure.

The all-pervading Akashtatva enables functions ranging from the growth of the fetus or all the growth that takes place throughout the lifetime. It occupies all the hollow places in the body and provides scope for any kind of new creation. An imbalance in Akashtatva leads to changes in the structure of cells causing diseases. Getting rid of the emptiness or a directionless state in life through proper grooming of the mind via working on subtle energy ensures balance in Akashtatva.

## **Conclusion**

The word Yog is derived from the Samskrut word Yuj, which means 'to unite'. Thus, uniting with our source, the cosmic consciousness, and the cosmic energy, is the goal of Yog, which not only ensures good health and general well-being; but also, spiritual progress. While the physical sciences play a vital role in ensuring well-being at the material level, the role of the ancient spiritual sciences is equally important in the same as well as while working in the realm of the subtle energies.

It is obvious that the right kind of diet, lifestyle, thought, and exercise, supplemented with need-based medical interventions, facilitate physical and mental health. The ancient sciences of India clearly highlight that for the mundane as well as the long-lasting wellbeing and joy; the above should be supplemented with support from the subtle energies. Indian traditions ensure that this is accomplished by connecting with the Panchtatvas and the consciousness via a range of elaborate processes including prayer, Dhyana and Dharana (different levels of meditation), Pooja (cleansing through deity worship), Mantra recitation, various daily recommended practices (dincharya), season-wise practices (Rutucharya) and age-specific purification practices (Sola Sanskars). When this gamut of time-tested practices is followed human well-being is more or less assured. When lacunae remain in following them, help from scientific and spiritual experts helps in correcting the imbalance.

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