

Ayurveda and Understanding Your Constitution By: Sylvie Gouin

When we look at yoga's history and go way back about 5000 years we find that yoga was a practice for the mind, ayurveda a practice for the health of the body and astrology for the soul. Fast forward to about the 14th century and yoga practice begins to also include physical movements known as asanas. That being said, as many of us know yoga is in and of itself a practice for the body, mind and soul and so is ayurveda. The astrology component remains a tool to connect with our individual and very unique expression.

Ayurveda is the master teacher for constitutions. It is a sister practice to yoga that allows us to refine our connection with our life as a whole by honoring our inherent constitution. The constitutions approach partly stems from a connection with nature and its elements. The tradition of yoga, as I know it, is rooted in a belief of *as within so without and as without so within*, which means that by looking at the world of nature we can understand our own nature and also that we see the world the way we see ourselves.

To understand our constitution we can look at the five elements of earth, water, fire, air and space and see how these elements impact and create our body.

Let's first look at each element and reflect on their substance:

Earth: Stable, grounded, rooted, heavy;

Water: Fluid, movement, wet, nourishing;

Fire: Hot, light as in luminous, intense, transformation;

Air: Light in weight, breath, breeze, wind; and

Space: Untouchable, expansive, possibilities, freedom.

Now if we think of these five elements in the context of our body, we can see the earth element in the aspect of our body that is very tangible. We can touch it, measure it, like a plant it grows from seed and eventually returns to the earth. As for the water, depending on what we read the body is between 60 - 80% water. Need I say more? The fire element is the process of digestion. A fire takes something, eats it up and transforms it. We do the same with food, conversations, and studies, etc. We take something in, digest it and become it either through our physicality or through our mental focus. As for the air, well we can live three weeks without food, three days without water and three minutes without air. Breath is a natural source of nourishment and cleansing. It controls the energy of the mind. If our breath is short, shallow and fragmented our thoughts are short, shallow and fragmented and if our breath becomes quiet and deep the mind stabilizes and clarity arises. As for space, think of the Sun and the planets that orbit around the sun and then apply this to your cells, the nucleus and the electrons and feel how space takes up the majority of the space. Think about it in terms of your body and giving your vertebrae space, your breath space and so on.

We can even apply all of this to our relationships with the outside world and how we naturally need or crave a balance of all five elements. Many of us want financial stability (earth), flexible schedules that allow us to take in the variety of life (water). We want passion, a certain level of change that stimulates growth and feel in love with our life (fire), we want to give and we want to receive, to love and be loved (air) and we need space, space to be, space to reflect, space to grow, space to rest, space for silence and so on.

If one of these is lacking or present in extreme we find ourselves feeling out of balance and we use elemental terms to express our experiences.

For example, we say I feel heavy and unmotivated or I am burning out or feel spacy unable to make a decision and so on.

Now if we apply this to constitutions we have three basic constitutions. So, although we all have all five elements, our individual constitutions can be earthy, watery, fiery and so on. We call these vatta, pitta and kapha.

In short, a kapha constitution is earthy and watery. People with this constitution tend to have thick features which include: thick hair, big lips, roundish nose, round eyes. They are either short or tall and tend to put on weight easily. They have a content nature, are great listeners and if you tell them a secret you know it's in the vault. The animal symbol to define kapha constitutions is the elephant.

Pitta people are fiery, they have intense piercing eyes and go after what they want. They are typically average height and weight, if they are fit, which they often are they are very fit. They have the highest chance of burn out as they can easily go, go, go until they just fall. The animal symbol is the lion.

Vatta people are connected with the element of air and space. They tend to be taller than average, thin with think skin and have a hard time keeping weight on. They are sensitive beings, often willing to help. Easy going and willing to try new things they are open to possibilities but often nervous. The animal symbol is the deer.

Some people are clearly vatta or clearly kapha or clearly pitta. Others are a mix of two and some

are what we call tridoshic, which means they have a combination of all three.

Knowing your constitution is very helpful as it can provide excellent guidance for dietary needs as well as exercise requirements, asana practice, herbs and so on.

Here are some examples: This is very general for the purpose of this article, but we can say that a kapha person who is tired often needs exercise to increase energy. A tired vatta person needs help with improving their sleep quality, which is often light with weird dreams. A tired pitta person will need basic rest and restoration. A vatta person with problems of bloating and constipation will need water and to slow down when eating taking care to chew thoroughly. A kapha person will need to reduce heavy foods and increase light foods such as greens and sprouts. A Kapha person benefits from salads and a vatta person benefits from soups. A pitta person does not get bloated or constipated they could digest a rock if you gave it to them, but acid reflux is a high possibility.

The more we understand this topic, the more we can bring it to our daily lives and find our unique expression (even in things like practicing asana). If you are very vatta, you benefit from grounding poses or simply from emphasizing the grounding aspect of any asana. If you are pitta or kapha you benefit from lightening up. For a kapha person that means practicing poses that stimulate movement and for a pitta person this means lightening up in terms of attitude. Smiling more and reducing the comparing aspect of practice.

To find out more join us for the six week ayurveda series: Yoga for your unique type offered Wednesday Sept 21st to October 26th. 7:30-8:30PM - Beyond Yoga in Kanata