

The Five Elements Part I: Ether

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The element ether, called “akasha” in Sanskrit is the first of the five great elements (pancha mahabhutas). It comes first because it is the most subtle of the elements. Often referred to as “space” it is the essence of emptiness. It is the space the other elements fill. The origin of ether is shabda. Shabda is the tanmatra or primordial, unmanifested form of sound. Shabda is the primordial space from which vibration emerges long before it takes the form of sound in the ear. Sound and ether are inseparable. Because of their intimate relationship, the ear is considered the associated sense organ of the element ether and voice (mouth) is its organ of action. Hearing loss and loss of the voice are difficulties that are often due to vitiation of the ether element in the body. Ether has qualities. However, these qualities are based more upon the absence of its opposing quality than on the actual quality itself. For instance, ether is cold. It is cold because it lacks warmth created by fire. Ether is light because it lacks the heaviness created by earth and water. Ether is immobile because it lacks the propulsive nature of air. Ether is subtle because it lacks the profound presence of the more obvious elements. Ether is also omnipresent. It is everywhere. It is the substratum from which all other elements are derived. Ether is a part of all other elements. Within any aspect of creation, ether may be found. Ether is the most expansive of the elements. Without form or boundaries, ether has no limits. Because of its expansive quality, ether is the cause of differentiation. Unrestrained, ether awaits a propulsive force to assist it in moving outward from the center of one-ness. As a result form is able to take shape and differences emerge. In the formation of the embryo, it is ether that is responsible for allowing change and growth to take place. Ether creates the space for the other elements to fill. That which is the most subtle and difficult to perceive is a function of the element ether. The mind is composed of ether. It is formless and nearly impossible to contain. While the mind becomes easily disturbed, ether represents the substratum upon which thoughts and emotions ride like waves upon the ocean. The sattvic or undisturbed mind is an expression of the essence of ether. In the body, ether is expressed within the empty spaces. The hollow of the empty intestines, blood vessels, bladder and the lungs are filled with ether. Vitiation of ether in the body results in an increase of space and a decrease in structure. The result is the destruction of tissue. Parkinson's disease is an example of a condition where space is created in the body where once there was cellular structure. The loss of dopamine producing cells in the substantia nigra of the brain stem creates an increase in emptiness. A similar state is seen in the pancreas due to the destruction of islet cells. Vitiation of space (ether) contributes to the symptomatic dysfunctions that follow. The Vata dosha contains both ether and air. Hence, any vitiation of ether will ultimately result in a vitiation of Vata. Therefore, one method of controlling vata dosha is to prevent ether from increasing. Ether is prevented from increasing by filling the emptiness in our lives. Our lives become full, not by being busy, but by being nourished physically and emotionally. Proper nourishment acts as a container for ether and the vata dosha. Moist, heavy, satisfying foods pacify ether as the empty space of the digestive system becomes full. Emotionally, love is the highest form of nourishment. By taking in the other elements the natural tendencies of ether are pacified. All of creation is made up of the five elements in different proportions. In our diet, the bitter taste contains the most ether, although ether by itself is tasteless. The bitter taste is composed of both ether and air and it is air that provides the uniqueness of the taste. Consuming bitter foods is an excellent way to increase the influence of the ether element. This is wonderful if a person is overly constricted and driven by their routines. However, an excess of ether in the diet, especially the diet of the individual with a vata constitution^{i[2]} can result in becoming too expansive. While this increases creativity it also leads to becoming ungrounded. Obviously, a balance is desired. The winter is the season of ether. The season of ether begins after the leaves have fallen and earth is barren. Nature intends for everything and everyone to become lighter at this time. There is a danger of becoming too light at this time if the proper precautions are not taken. Thus, human beings have historically prepared for this season by storing up food and other supplies to see them through this period of emptiness. In the cycle of life,

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death is the time of ether. The body disintegrates and the elements flee their boundaries. All that remains is the subtly of our spirit. Ether characterizes the elemental make up of the individualized soul while it maintains its separate-ness from the whole of Purusha. Purusha itself however is unmanifested and thus in accordance with the principles of Sankhya philosophy precedes the manifestation of all elements. Hence, it is subtler still than ether and because of this, it is far beyond our ability to capture it in words. Purusha is without attributes. Purusha is the primordial essence of ether.

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