

The Five Elements Part III: Fire

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The element fire, called “tejas” in Sanskrit is the third of the five great elements (pancha mahabhutas). It comes third because it evolves from ether and air, containing the essence of these elements within it. Ether provides fire the space to exist within. Air provides fire the capacity to burn. It is because of air that fire will never be still. The fire element represents the capacity for heat and light. Fire is the generator of energy in the body just as the sun is the generator of energy for the earth. Fire represents all sources of energy in the world including solar, hydroelectric, nuclear, fossil fuel and bio-diesel. Fire is the process of liberating energy from its source.

The origin of the fire element is the tanmatra of vision called rupa. Rupa means form or color. Both form and color are the result of perception. Rupa is the tanmatra or primordial, unmanifested form of perception, light, vision and thus the fire element. Fire and the visual sense have a special relationship. Fire provides the light for perception. The eyes are the vehicle through which light is digested and perception takes place. Hence, disorders of visual perception are primarily those of the element fire.

The feet are the organ of action associated with the fire element. It is through the feet that we react to what we see. Use of the feet allows a person to change direction based upon perception. Not only may the direction be changed but the intensity of progress. The choice of direction and the intensity of action are functions of the fire element.

To know any element is to know its qualities. Fire is hot, light, dry, rough, subtle, flowing, sharp, clear and soft. Fire is neither stable nor mobile. Fire neither stands still nor generates motion. Inherent within fire is air and it is the air that provides fire with its mobile quality. Although fire is subtle, its effects are clearly observable and so we have a clear sense of what it is. It is the heat of fire that is most recognizable. We associate the element fire with the fires we can see. The ancient rishis idea of fire was more comprehensive. Fire represents light, heat, and luster, the power of transformation, energy, understanding and metabolism.

In the human body, fire is expressed in five distinct ways. The fire that provides our body with the capacity to digest food is called pachaka agni. The fire that ignites the intellect, digests ideas and allows for understanding is sadhaka agni. The fire of perception that digests visual impression into recognizable images is called alochaka agni. The fire that energizes and invigorates the body adding color to the body is called ranjaka agni. The fire that digests touch and sunlight and gives off the radiance associated with healthy skin is the light provided by bhrajaka agni. Because fire has a destructive quality, in the body it is always mixed with a small amount of water to keep it from destroying the tissues. The container of fire and water is Pitta. Hence, the five agni's are also called the five types of pitta.

Excess fire in the body results in a build up of heat. Naturally, deficient fire results in a feeling of being cold. There are other ramifications. As heat builds up in the body, there is a need to eliminate excess. Hence, the body sweats and urinates more and the stools become looser and more frequent. The luster of skin increases and the eyes shine brighter. The mind becomes sharper, more focused and the intellect strengthens. If fire increases too much, there are negative consequences. The skin may erupt in red rashes, the eyes become blood shot, the mind becomes intense, the tissues of the body may become inflamed and there may be fever. A lack of fire in the body results in a loss of luster as the skin takes on a gray or pale tone and metabolism slows down. In the digestive system food is poorly digested, in the mind it becomes difficult to digest new information. As the body tries to hold on to heat; sweating, urination and bowel elimination all decrease.

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The pitta dosha contains both fire and water but it is fire that plays the more dominating role. Hence, any vitiation of fire will ultimately result in a vitiation of pitta. Pitta remains healthy as the fires of the body are well tended.

Tending the fire in the body begins with monitoring pachaka agni or the fire of digestion. When the digestive fire is healthy, there is little gas and elimination is regular occurring on a daily basis 1-2 times per day. The digestive fire is increased primarily by hot, spicy sour and salty foods and is decreased by both heavy and cold foods. Hence, if digestion is weak and the fire low, the diet should be made lighter and spicier until digestion normalizes.

All of creation is made up of the five elements in different proportions. In our diet, the pungent, sour and salty tastes contain the most fire. Of these, the pungent taste will increase fire the most rapidly but it is the sour taste that has the greatest long term effect. Pickled foods, yogurt and foods marinated in vinaigrette are examples of sour foods.

Summer is the season of fire. At this time of year, the rotation of the earth around the sun results in longer daylight hours as the fiery sun plays a great role in our lives. The air is warmer, the light is longer and the activity of the people and plants reach their peak. Summer is the most naturally active time of year. So long as the weather does not become unbearably hot, summer is the time to do all of those things you planned for during the late winter and spring. It is the time of year to work diligently to fulfill dharma. Care must be taken however because if a person becomes too focused and intense, fire will increase too much and pitta will become vitiated. Thus, it is important to keep one's fire in check and spend some time by the cool water while maintaining a diet that is cooler and less spicy.

In the cycle of life and death, fire represents our most productive years. Having been well prepared for this cycle of life during one's youth, these years are for the fulfillment of dharma. Each person's capacity for work and service is greatest during this phase of life. Regardless of constitution^[2], from puberty through the transition into old age, the fire burns bright inside of us. For those with a naturally fiery nature, it burns brightest and these individuals must be careful not to work too hard and burn themselves out.

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