

Pañca-mahābhūta

The Five Gross Material Elements

by Manju Medha Magriplis

sūta uvāca
samāhitātmano brahman
brahmaṇaḥ parameṣṭhinaḥ
hṛdy ākāśād abhūn nādo
vṛtti-rodhād vibhāvvyate

“Sūta Gosvāmī said: O brāhmaṇa, first the subtle vibration of transcendental sound appeared from the sky of the heart of the most elevated Lord Brahmā, whose mind was perfectly fixed in spiritual realisation. One can perceive this subtle vibration when one stops all external hearing.”

Because *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* is the supreme Vedic literature, the sages headed by Śaunaka desired to trace out its source. Ultimately, all sounds vibrate within the sky, and in the internal region of the heart there is a type of sky meant for the vibration of Vedic sounds. The seed, or source, of all Vedic sounds is the *omkāra*.¹

From the heart of the topmost demigod, Brahmā, came the subtle transcendental vibration, and from this subtle sound vibration arose the syllable *om*, greatly potent and self-luminous. Using this *omkāra*, Lord Brahmā created the original Vedas and taught them to his sons, Marīci and others, who were all saintly leaders of the *brāhmaṇa* community. This body of Vedic knowledge was handed down through the disciplic succession of spiritual masters until the end of *Dvāpara-yuga*, when Lord Vyāsadeva divided it into four parts and instructed various schools of sages in these four *samhitās*.²

The Lord says in *Bhagavad-gītā*, *praṇavaḥ sarva-vedeṣu*: “I am the syllable *om* in all the Vedic mantras.” Vedic knowledge begins with the vibration of the transcendental sound *praṇava*, *omkāra*.³

Omkāra (*praṇava*) is the symbolic sound representation of the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

The Origin Of Creation Is Sound Vibration

First the *tan-mātrā* sound is created, which is the subtle form of ether. It is stated also in the *Vedānta-sūtra* that sound is the origin of all objects of material possession and that by sound one can also dissolve this material existence. The sound is the representation of the actual object, as the sound produced speaking of the object gives an idea of the description of the object. Therefore sound is the subtle characteristic of the object. ⁴

The origin of creation is sound vibration, and if the sound vibration is clear and purified, perfect knowledge and perfect activities actually become manifest. Sound is the cause of the sky, and sky is the cause of *śrotram*, the ear. The ear is the first sense for receiving knowledge. One must give aural reception to any knowledge one wants to receive, either material or spiritual. Therefore *śrotram* is very important. The Vedic knowledge is called *śruti*; knowledge has to be received by hearing. By hearing only can we have access to either material or spiritual enjoyment.

The activities and characteristics of the ethereal element can be observed as accommodation for the room for the external and internal existences of all living entities, namely the field of activities of the vital air, the senses and the mind.

The mind, the senses and the vital force, or living entity, have forms, although they are not visible to the naked eye. Form rests in subtle existence in the sky, and internally it is perceived as the veins within the body and the circulation of the vital air. Externally there are invisible forms of sense objects. The production of the invisible sense objects [sound, touch, form, taste and smell] is the external activity of the ethereal element, and the circulation of vital air and blood is its internal activity. That subtle forms exist in the ether has been proven by modern science by transmission of television, by which forms or photographs of one place are transmitted to another place by the action of the ethereal element. That is very nicely explained here. This verse is the potential basis of great scientific research work, for it explains how subtle forms are generated from the ethereal element, what their characteristics and actions are, and how the tangible elements, namely air, fire, water and earth, are manifested from the subtle form. Mental activities, or psychological actions of thinking, feeling and willing, are also activities on the platform of ethereal existence.⁵

bhūmir āpo 'nalo vāyuḥ
khaṁ mano buddhir eva ca
ahaṅkāra itīyaṁ me
bhinnā prakṛtir aṣṭadhā

“Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intelligence and false ego—all together these eight comprise My separated material energies.” *Bhūmi*, earth, includes all the objects of sense perception—*rūpa* (form), *rasa* (taste), *gandha* (smell), *śabda* (sound) and *sparsā* (touch). Within the earth are the fragrance of roses, the taste of sweet fruit, and whatever else we want. As stated in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (1.10.4), *sarva-kāma-dughā mahī*: the earth (*mahī*) contains all our requirements. Thus the objects of sense perception are all present in *bhūmi*, or the earth. The gross material elements and subtle material elements (mind, intelligence and *ahankāra*, false ego) constitute the total material energy.

Within the total material energy are the three material modes or qualities. These qualities—*sattva-guṇa*, *rajo-guṇa* and *tamo-guṇa*—belong not to the soul but to the material energy. It is because of the interaction of these three material modes of nature that the five knowledge-gathering senses (the eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin), the five working senses (the hands, legs, speech, genitals and anus) and their controller, the mind, are manifested. Then, according to these modes, the living entity gets the opportunity to perform different types of karma with different types of knowledge, thinking, feeling and willing. Thus the bodily machine begins to work. ⁶

The Five Gigantic Creations

In the material energy, the principal manifestations are eight, as above mentioned. Out of these, the first five manifestations, namely earth, water, fire, air and sky, are called the five gigantic creations or the gross creations, within which the five sense objects are included. They are the manifestations of physical sound, touch, form, taste and smell.

Sound is the cause of the sky, sky is the cause of the air, air is the cause of fire, fire is the cause of water, and water is the cause of earth. When one element mixes with another, the number of its qualities increases. In the sky there is only sound; in the air there are sound and touch; in the fire there are sound, touch and form; in the water there are sound, touch, form and taste; and in the earth there are sound, touch, form, taste and smell. Therefore earth is the reservoir of all the qualities of the other elements. Earth is the sum total of all other elements. The earth has all five qualities of the elements, water has four qualities, fire has three, air has two, and the sky has only one quality, sound. ⁷

The five gross material elements—earth, water, fire, air and sky— form the basic building blocks of the material world. When the conditioned living entity enters within these five elements, consciousness becomes manifest, along with the functions of the mind and intelligence.

The whole process of creation is an act of gradual evolution and development from one element to another, reaching up to the variegatedness of the earth as so many trees, plants, mountains, rivers, reptiles, birds, animals and varieties of human beings. The quality of sense

perception is also evolutionary, namely generated from sound, then touch, and from touch to form. Taste and odor are also generated along with the gradual development of sky, air, fire, water and earth. They are all mutually the cause and effect of one another, but the original cause is the Lord Himself in plenary portion, as Mahā-Viṣṇu lying in the causal water of the *mahat-tattva*.⁸

Any material construction is nothing but an amalgamation or combination of material elements in varied proportions. These elements exist both within and beyond the body. For example, although the sky exists in space, it also enters within the body.

Water Is The Principal Element

The seven elements of the body, namely the thin layer on the skin, the skin itself, the flesh, blood, fat, marrow and bone, are all made of earth, water and fire, whereas the life breath is produced by the sky, water and air.

The construction of the whole material world is prominently made by three elements, namely earth, water and fire. But the living force is produced by sky, air and water. So water is the common element in both the gross and subtle forms of all material creation, and it should be noted herewith that due to necessity, water, being most prominent in the material creation, is the principal element of all the five. This material body is thus an embodiment of the five elements, and the gross manifestation is perceived because of three, namely earth, water, and fire. Sensations of touch are perceived due to the thin layer on the skin, and bone is as good as hard stone. The breathing air of life is produced of sky, air and water, and therefore open air, regular bath and ample space in which to live are favourable for healthy vitality. Fresh produce from the earth like grains and vegetables, as well as fresh water and heat, is good for the upkeep of the gross body.⁹

All Material Creations Take Place From Subtle To Gross

Because of destiny, the touch sensation, the interactions of air, and the situation of the mind, which is produced of the ethereal element, one receives a body according to his previous activities. Needless to say, a living entity transmigrates from one form to another. His form changes according to destiny and by the arrangement of a superior authority which controls the interaction of air and the mental situation. Form is the combination of different types of sense perception. Predestined activities are the plans of the mental situation and the interaction of air.¹⁰

From the smallest particle of matter to the grossest body such as a star or a planet, all are governed by these five elements. Under varying conditions these principles attract, repel, bind,

and blend with one another in unending ways, always following perfect logistics. Understanding their logistics is the key to leading a harmonious, healthy life.

All material creations take place from subtle to gross. The entire universe has developed in that manner. From the sky developed the touch sensation, which is a mixture of eternal time, the external energy and the glance of the Personality of Godhead. The touch sensation developed into the air in the sky. Similarly, all other gross matter also developed from subtle to gross: sound developed into sky, touch developed into air, form developed into fire, taste developed into water, and smell developed into earth. ¹¹

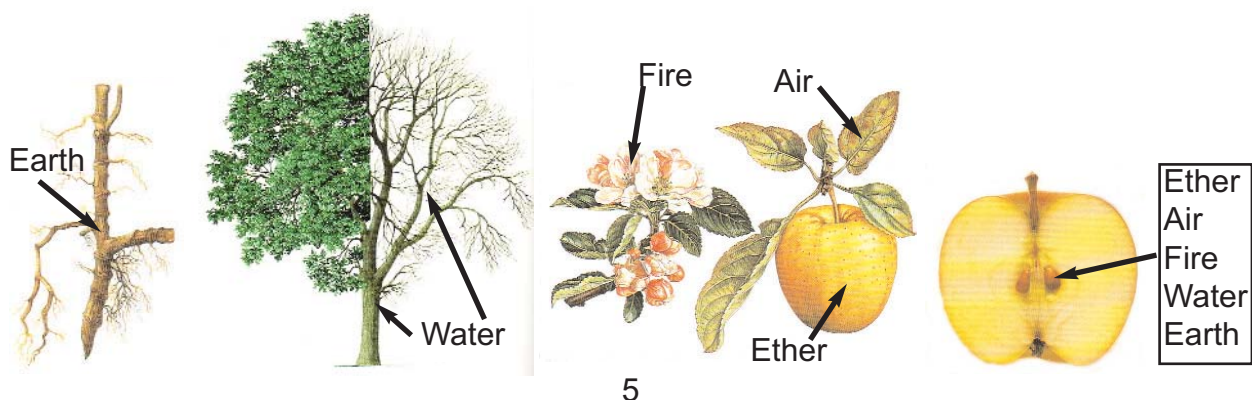
Ayurveda And The Five Elements

According to *ayurveda* all of the biological activities of our body and mind are governed by the three principles of *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. *Vata* governs all movements such as breathing and the circulation of all nutrients and waste products in the body. *Vata* is mainly composed of the elements ether and air. *Pitta*—which governs all metabolic activities, the conversion of nutrients into various tissues in the body, and mental comprehension—is mainly composed of the fire and water elements. *Kapha*—which acts as a binding principle and provides tissue sustenance in the body—is the product of the earth and water elements.

The element of water is the basis for the sensory experience of taste. The tongue must be wet in order to taste a substance. Try drying your tongue and then putting a small amount of sugar or pepper on it. You will not be able to taste it. A wet tongue is necessary for the perception of taste.

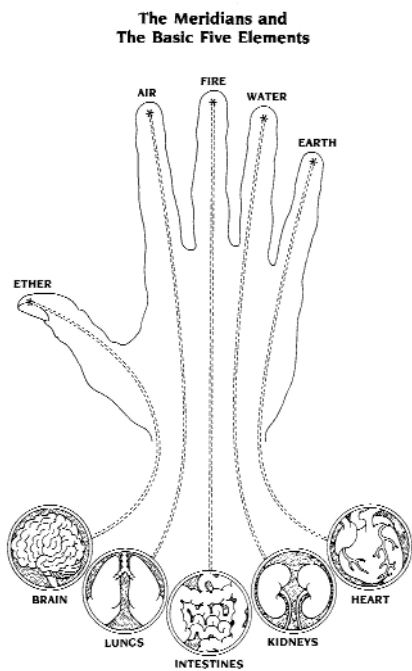
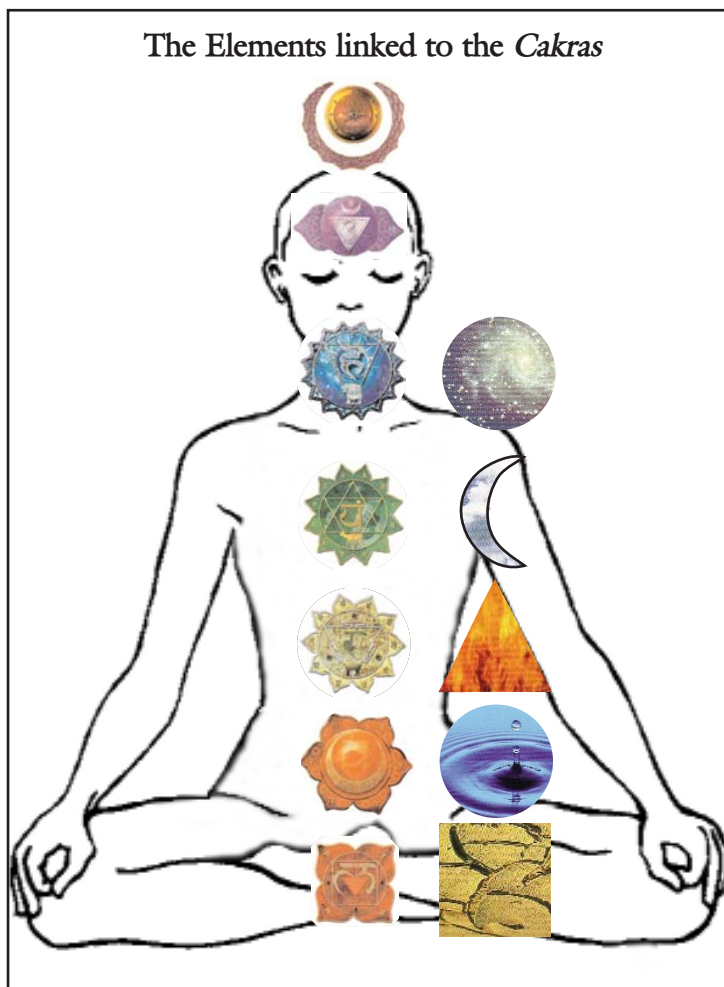
Ayurveda recognices six main tastes: sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter and astringent. These six tastes are derived from the five elements, each taste is composed of two elements. Sweet taste is composed of earth and water; sour of earth and fire; salty of water and fire; pungent of fire and air; bitter of air and ether; and astringent of air and earth. ¹²

The five parts of plants in *ayurveda*, *panchangam*, show how plant structure is related to the five elements. The root corresponds to earth, as the densest and lowest part connected to the earth. The stem and branches correspond to water, as they convey the water or sap of the plant. The flowers correspond to fire, which manifests light and colour. The leaves correspond



to air, since through them the wind moves the plant. The fruit corresponds to ether, the subtle essence of the plant. The seed contains all five elements, containing the entire potential plant within itself. ¹³

Similarly, the five elements are linked to the *cakras* or energy centres of the human energy system. The element earth is linked to the *mūlādhāra-cakra*, the element water is linked to the *svādhiṣṭhāna-cakra*, the element fire is linked to the *maṇipūra-cakra*, the element air is linked to the *anāhata-cakra*, and the element ether is linked to the *viśuddha-cakra*. Although the *cakras* are non-physical, they influence physical functioning. Their subtle channels through which *pranic* energy flows, the meridians or *nadis*, interface with many systems, both energetic and material.



The beats of our pulse not only correspond to the heartbeat, but they also reveal something about the important meridians that are connecting *pranic* currents of energy in the body. These currents circulate through the blood, passing through the vital organs such as the liver, kidney, heart and brain. By feeling the superficial and deep pulsations, a sensitive examiner can detect the conditions of these various organs. Each finger rests on a meridian of the element associated with the *dosha* of that place. (See hand chart.) For example, the index finger which rests on the *vata dosha* detects bodily air; the middle finger which touches on *pitta dosha* detects fire; and the ring finger which feels the *kapha* pulse, water. ¹⁴

We Function as Part of the Universe

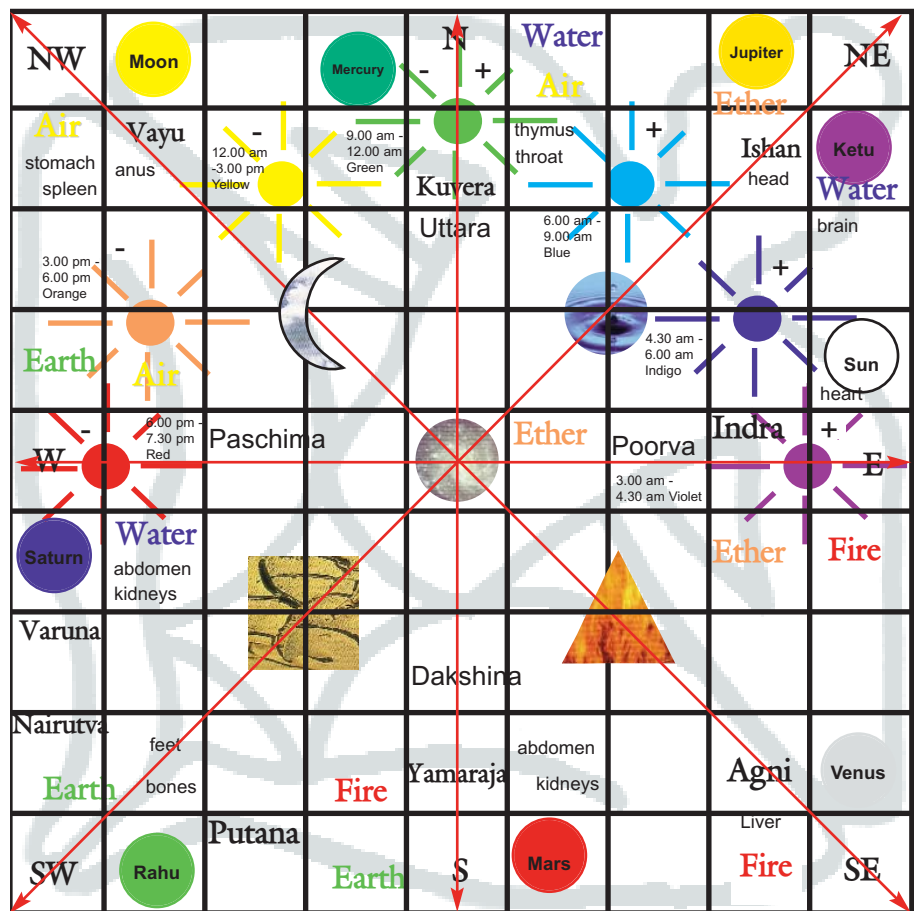
The celestial bodies are also composed of the five elements. The planetary forces described by astrology are thus governed by the subtle nature of the elements. Based on their

elemental composition, different planets and stars emanate different grades of energies. These energies have different influences on us, depending on the planets' proximity to each other, their size, the direction in which they are moving, and the speed at which they are rotating. Our material activities are being observed by different demigods, especially the sun-god, and are being recorded for the *karma* of one's next body. Astrological calculations are called *jyoti-śāstra*. Because the *jyoti*, or effulgence, in the material world comes from the different stars and planets, the science is called *jyoti-śāstra*, the science of the luminaries. By the calculations of *jyoti*, our future is indicated. In other words, all the luminaries—the stars, sun and moon—witness the activities of the conditioned soul. Thus one is awarded a particular type of body. ¹⁵

An individual takes birth based on the accumulated karma of the past and this determines the time, date, and place of birth. The various planets and stars that are in a particular combination at the time of birth (documented by one's natal chart) determine one's course of life. This blueprint of an individual constitutes *jyotish*, Vedic astrology.

As much as these planets and stars affect our lives directly, they also impact us indirectly through structures and symbols. These forces influence houses, buildings, temples and townships. When properly created and arranged, a structure will harmonise all the energies of the planets to produce a beneficial vibration that will foster the best possible result within the limits of one's karma. Guiding this is the role of the science of *vastu*.

Just as solar home designs take into consideration the movement of the sun, the amount of sunshine, and the direction providing the maximum number of hours of sunlight, the sun is a major consideration in *vastu* homes as well. However, *vastu* also takes into consideration the subtle influences of the other planetary forces in our



Vastu Purusha mandala with the movement of the sun (southern hemisphere), the nadis, affected bodily organs, and the demigods, the planets, and the five elements all in their respective ruling directions.

solar system, Vastu Purusha (the lord who resides in all buildings and determines the quality of one's living space), the magnetic field of the earth, the powerful influence of the controlling demigods and personalities in the eight directions, the *marmas* and *mahamarmas* and the nadis of a space.

In *vastu* the *nadis* are the energetic meridians of a space. As the meridians are subtle energy channels in the body, similarly within the body of space these meridians are also called nadis. The crossing points of the nadies are very special points. Each of these points is a special energetic point.

Vastu is profound and deep-rooted. It provides for a clear expression of the five elements in a structure, enabling it to become a living, vibrating entity. The arrangement of different elements in different proportions and shapes is what determines how the energies flow through a structure. Understanding how to make a house harmonious with other living, vibrating structures (the inhabitants) is the science of *vastu*, which has proven itself to be very accurate and reproducible. When all the elements are properly arranged, a structure becomes a *vastu* house. Thus the three Vedic sciences—*jyotish*, *vastu*, and *ayurveda*—are all significant in understanding how we function as part of the universe. This understanding of our holistic makeup is the key to living in a balanced state of well being, enjoying a happy, healthy, and prosperous life.

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- ¹² *The Yoga of Herbs* Dr. David Frawley and Dr. Vasant Lad page 25
- ¹³ *The Yoga of Herbs* Dr. David Frawley and Dr. Vasant Lad page 10
- ¹⁴ *Ayurveda, the Science of Self-Healing* Dr. Vasant Lad page 56, 57
- ¹⁵ *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 5.13.4 HDG A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda

knowledge acquiring
senses

Elements

Tan-mātras
(qualities)

