



This article explores the relationship between the three principles or Tridoṣa, with the three qualities or Guṇa, and how Āyurveda views their qualities and modes of expression in the functions of the body.

One of the threads that links Āyurveda and Yoga with the Vedic schools of thought and non-Vedic schools such as Buddhism, is that everything is subject to change.

Nothing is permanent as Buddha proclaimed:

*“Sarvaṃ Duḥkha, Sarvaṃ Anityam” (All is suffering, all is ephemeral).*

This echoes the view expressed by Patañjali:

*“Duḥkham Eva Sarvaṃ Vivekinaḥ” (All is suffering for one who is discerning).*

This raises the question of what is Viveka and what is Duḥkha.

### 1. Viveka and Action.

Viveka means being able to discern both sides. As much as I understand myself, I must understand what is going on around me. In the fourth chapter of the primary Yoga text Patañjali tells us that our understanding of ourselves is directly related to our understanding of what is outside of ourselves.

From this we can see that Yoga is not an escape from our actions but an inquiry into their effect on ourselves and on our surrounding relationships.

We are living within this world and are compelled to act within different situations each day. Some of these actions are favourable and some actions lead to difficulties. Yoga is a means by which we examine what is behind our action, who acts and why our actions are not always successful.

Within the Yoga Sūtra these questions are examined and means are presented by which we can refine the quality of our action to the point where it is in complete harmony with ourselves and our external environment. In other words acting in a way that does not produce regrettable consequences.

This is the ideal; however, Patañjali respects the characteristics of the individual and presents the concept of Viniyoga in the third chapter. The word Viniyoga means the appropriate application of Yoga with regard to and respect for place, time, culture, and individual needs

## 2. Duḥkha and Action.

Indian thought suggest that there is something within us that prevents us from perceiving clearly and thus acting with a clear intention.

This attitude manifests in us in the form of Duḥkha (a sense of constriction in the heart) and refers to our emotional state and its subsequent effect on our mental function and ability to think and act. Duḥkha is the state of mind where we feel restricted from acting and seeing clearly.

This “feeling” can express itself in different forms and the first step in Yoga is to see that the impact from Duḥkha does not increase in us:

Yoga Sutra 11 16

*Heyaṃ Duḥkham Anāgatam*

*“The sense of suffering that is to come should be overcome.”*

A detailed presentation of the source of Duḥkha and how it manifests is not within the intention of these articles. However coming back to the concept of Puruṣa or the Seer presented in article two, Yoga tells us that an action done with clarity from the awareness of Puruṣa cannot be disturbed by Duḥkha even though it may have painful consequences.

## 3. Viveka and Duḥkha.

This then is the purpose of the self–therapy presented in the Yoga Sūtra. To increase our sensitivity to ourselves, our surroundings and our relationships. This awareness will guide us in acting with ever increasing insight into what is favourable and what leads to further difficulties.

That is why Duḥkha is more apparent for a Viveki, one who is seeking clarity, than for someone who is not. Increased awareness leads to a greater sensitivity to existing problems but also enables one to anticipate more easily the impact of Duḥkha on the outcome of future actions.

## YOGA AND THE THREE GUNAS

Now the question can be asked as to how do the three Principles of Tridoṣa – Air, Fire, and Water – fit into Yoga?

That the ancient teachers understood Āyurveda is not in doubt; examples have been given from the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā mentioning the therapeutic effects of certain practices in influencing the Tridoṣa.

Looking at the Tridoṣa within Yoga we come back to the concept of the three Guṇa.

Yoga philosophy tells us that the universe originally existed as a formless mass in a state of equilibrium. The equilibrium was a result of a perfect balance between the three Guṇa, the three qualities of clarity, activity and inertia.

We outlined previously the reason, according to Āyurveda and Yoga, why the equilibrium was disturbed and the movement of evolution initiated. This was because of the proximity of Puruṣa or Awareness exciting movement in Matter.

An illustration is given in Indian thought of the dancer, starting to perform because of the presence of an audience; there is not contact, only the proximity of the Seer (the audience) provoking movement in the Seen (the dancer).

Remembering the first axiom of Āyurveda, namely, everything in the universe has its counterpart in the human body.

Comparing the Triguṇa and the Tridoṣa in terms of the human system we find activity at the physical and energetic levels of the system expressed through the Tridoṣa and activity at the mental and emotional levels expressed through the Triguṇa.

The textbook of Āyurveda, the Caraka Saṃhitā, tells us:

*“Disease producing factors in the human body are Vāta, Pitta and Kapha (Air, Fire, and Water) while those in the mind are Rajoguṇa and Tamoguṇa (Activity and Inertia)”.*

It is interesting to note that Sattva Guṇa or the energy of clarity is excluded as a mental disturbance, hence the idea of maintaining one’s mental view through how we deal with the impact of Rajas and Tamas on our inner life.

So, the three Guṇa provide the basis for distinctions in human temperament and individual differences in psychological and emotional dispositions. These three subtle energies are primarily responsible for our behavioural patterns, whilst the three Doṣa impact on the physical and energetic levels of expression and interaction.

Yoga is an inquiry into the positive and negative influences of both the Guṇa and the Doṣa using various tools such as posture, diet, breathing, meditation and study in reviewing our attitudes and energetic and emotional patterns.

Yoga seeks to reduce the adverse effects of the two Guṇa so that the mind is freer from “inertia” or “dancing” and the feeling of “lightness” or clarity can prevail and support the individual in the concept of right action.

It must be stressed that Yoga always emphasises the need of a teacher to guide the pupil into awareness of their strengths and limitations. In other words to act as a mirror by which they can see themselves, come to know where to start or direct their inquiry and to choose which tools are most appropriate for the various stages of their practice.

## ĀYURVEDA AND THE TRIDOṢA

From this point we come back to Āyurveda and look specifically at characteristics of the three principles, air, fire, and water.

### 1 Vāta – Air (Also compared to the Wind)

Of the three principles air occupies the most prominent position. Unlike fire and water, it does not have any corporeal form. It is also unstable in nature. So because of its instability and incorporeal nature it is inaccessible and has no definite size or shape, only being known by its actions.

It is linked to the elements of ether and air and is said to have certain physical properties. The Caraka Saṃhitā describes it as rough, cool, light, subtle, mobile, non-slimy, and coarse.

The tastes connected with Vāta are astringent, pungent, and bitter. Āyurveda tells us that it is balanced by herbs, foods and minerals having qualities opposite to those described.

Furthermore it stresses the importance of this principle when it says “one who is capable of treating Vata can treat any disease”.

## 2 Pitta – Fire (Also compared to the Sun)

With the help of the principle of Air, Fire can exist and function. The element of Fire is linked to Pitta (some sources indicate the link as a combination of two elements, Fire and Water).

It has certain physical properties. Pitta is oily, hot, sharp, liquid, sour, fluid and pungent. It has Sattva or the Guṇa of light or clarity predominant. The tastes connected with Pitta are pungent.

## 3 Kapha – Water (also compared with the Moon)

Only with the help of the Air and Fire can Water exist and function. It is linked to the elements of earth and water. It has certain physical properties, Kapha is heavy, cool, soft, oily, sweet, immobile and slimy.

It has Tamas or the Guṇa of inertia predominant.

The tastes connected with Kapha are sweet, sour and saline. Āyurveda tells us that Kapha is relieved by herbs, foods, and minerals having opposite qualities.

## THE TRIDOSHA AND THE HUMAN BODY

Having outlined the properties of each of the three principles we can go further and detail the seat” of each within the body and their primary action.

### 1 Vāta – Air (Also compared to the Wind)

In the body, air comprises all the forces that cause the body to move and act and the sensations that induce the actions. It is seen as the prime mover of nervous force and is responsible for catabolic activity.

In general it circulates in the lungs, heart, colon, bones and joints, genitals, nervous system and alimentary canal.

The main location or “seat” is the large intestine and pelvis (the largest bone in the body). Creation comes from the pelvic girdle, thus Vāta is the Creator, the seat of creation.

It is said to manifest in five forms known as Pañca Prāṇa (Five Vital Airs).

### 2 Pitta – Fire (Also known as Bile)

In the body, fire, the principle of heat, is responsible for metabolic activity. Its “seat” is the abdomen, above the navel and below the diaphragm.

Its primary action is that of digestion and it circulates in the liver, spleen, bile duct, pancreas, blood, eyes, brain, skin (lustre or colour of the skin is an expression of fire. Hence skin diseases can be seen as an imbalance in this Doṣa).

Its distinctive functions are colouration or pigmentation, digestion, heat, intelligence, sight, hunger, thirst, radiance of body, and temperaments such as cheerfulness, anger, jealousy.

Āyurveda also describes five types of Pitta.

### 3 Kapha – Water (Also known as Phlegm)

The Water principle is sometimes called Śleṣma or phlegm (it sticks one organ to another). It is the anabolic aspect of the body, giving it shape and stamina.

Its “seat” is the chest. It encompasses synovial fluid, cerebrospinal fluid, phlegm, mucous, saliva and other lubricants. Its distinctive functions are viscosity, nourishment, binding of the joints, solidity of the body, sexual vigour and temperaments such as fortitude, forbearance, patience, hence the term phlegmatic.

### RELATIONSHIP OF THE TRIDOṢA

Having presented three principles we must not forget that they are interrelated. A further example of how they interact can be seen in the digestive process.

The movement of food through the gastro–intestinal tracts is governed by the principle of Air.

The principle of Fire regulates the secretions of digestive ferments, enzymes, and the temperature at which the food “cooks”.

The principle of Water provides the lubricating mucous.

It should be noted here that mucous is not something to be eliminated from the body. It is noticeable how often overweight people have an ease of movement. Why is this?

Āyurveda relates mucous to Kapha and to the lubrication of the joints therefore attempts using techniques such as the Kriyā to remove mucous for the sake of it should be considered carefully.

The Yoga text, the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, is very clear when discussing the various techniques for “cleansing” the system known as Kriyā.

Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā II 21  
*Medaḥ Śleṣmādhikaḥ Pūrvaṃ*  
*Ṣaṭkarmāṇi Samācaret I*  
*Anyas tu Nācaret tāni*  
*Doṣānāṃ Samabhāvataḥ II*

“Those having excessive fat or phlegm should first practise the six acts (before attempting Prāṇāyāma).

“Those in who these Doṣa are not in a state of excess need not practise them”.

We can see that the Kriyā are indicated only when there is an excess of Kapha and only then as a preliminary measure to help restore the balance in the Doṣa. If continued beyond the appropriate point the technique will have the opposite effect and promote symptoms of excess Vāta.

Therefore the guidance of a Yoga teacher, who understands the cleansing techniques and the principles of Āyurveda which govern their use, should be sought.

Later in the same chapter the following verse appears:

Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā II 37/38  
*Prāṇāyāmair eva Sarve Praśuṣyanti Malā Iti I*  
*Ācāryāṇām Tu Keśāñcid anyatkarma Na Saṃmatam II*

“Some teachers do not advocate any other practice, being of the opinion that all the impurities are dried up by the practice of Prāṇāyāma alone.”

According to Āyurveda and Yoga there are three methods of purifying the Nādī, or subtle nervous system, namely Fire, Air and Water.

Water is the crudest method, then comes Air, and finally the subtlest method is Fire. This is why Prāṇāyāma is recommended as it works with the two subtlest principles of Air and Fire.

Again the guidance of a competent teacher is to be recommended in observing the tendency of the breath and setting techniques appropriate to the individual student’s inherent breathing patterns.

## SUMMARY

Both Āyurveda and Yoga are concerned with the process of disease.

In other words an absence of ease in the physical and energetic functions of the body and the presence of clarity in the mind.

Yoga calls this constriction in the emotions and mind Duḥkha.

Having presented ideas on a state of mind called Duḥkha, the next article will continue to look at disease from the viewpoints of Yoga and extend Āyurveda further with ideas on the three principles.

This time looking at how particular individuals have a dominant principle which helps to determine their physiological and psychological constitution.