

## Anatomical Foundations of the Human Body in Relation to the *Pañchamahābhūta* (Five Element Theory)

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### Abstract

The *Pañchamahābhūta* theory—comprising *Ākāśa* (space), *Vāyu* (air), *Agni* (fire), *Jala* (water), and *Prthvī* (earth)—forms the philosophical and physiological foundation of Ayurveda.<sup>1</sup> While modern anatomy describes the body using physical structures and systems, Ayurveda explains the same through elemental principles that govern structure, function, and sensory perception.<sup>2</sup> This review explores the relationship between human anatomy and the *Pañchamahābhūta*, highlighting how each element contributes to the formation of tissues, sensory organs, motor organs, and physiological processes.<sup>3</sup> The article integrates classical Ayurvedic references

with modern anatomical understanding to present a holistic view of the human body.

### Keywords

*Pañchamahābhūta*, Ayurvedic Anatomy, Five Elements, Ayurveda Physiology, Elemental Theory.

### Introduction

Ayurveda views the human body not merely as a structural entity but as a dynamic field composed of five basic elements known as the *Pañchamahābhūta*.<sup>1</sup> These elements combine in varied proportions to create the architecture of the body, its tissues (*Dhātu*), waste products (*Mala*), sensory abilities, and functional capacities.<sup>4</sup> While modern anatomy focuses on gross and microscopic structures, Ayurveda interprets these structures

through the lens of elemental qualities.<sup>5</sup> Understanding the *Pañchamahābhūta* in relation to human anatomy provides an integrative framework for connecting traditional Ayurvedic knowledge with contemporary biological sciences.<sup>2</sup> The five-element theory not only describes physical composition but also explains sensory functioning, physiological actions, and psychosomatic balance.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. *Pañchamahābhūta*: The Five Elemental Principles

#### 1.1 *Ākāśa* (Space/Ether)

Represents openness, cavities, and subtle spaces within the body, allowing movement, vibration, and inter-structural communication.<sup>6</sup>

#### 1.2 *Vāyu* (Air)

Responsible for movement, circulation, nerve conduction, respiration, and tactile perception.<sup>6</sup>

#### 1.3 *Agni / Tejas* (Fire)

Controls transformation, digestion, metabolism, vision, cellular enzymatic activity, and thermoregulation.<sup>7</sup>

#### 1.4 *Jala / Āpa* (Water)

Provides cohesion, lubrication, fluid balance, plasma volume, saliva, mucus, and internal moisture.<sup>6</sup>

#### 1.5 *Pr̥thvī* (Earth)

Represents solidity and structure, forming bones, muscles, cartilage, teeth, nails, and skin thickness.<sup>6</sup>

## Anatomy and Their *Pañchamahābhūtika* Relations

### 1. *Tridoṣa*

- *Vāta Doṣa*: Predominantly *Vāyu* + *Ākāśa*<sup>8</sup>
- *Pitta Doṣa*: Predominantly *Agni* + *Āpa*<sup>8</sup>
- *Kapha Doṣa*: Predominantly *Jala* + *Pr̥thvī*<sup>8</sup>

### 2. *Saptadhātu*

According to Ayurveda, each *Dhātu* is composed of all five *Mahābhūtas* in varying proportions, with dominance determining its structure and function.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Dhātu*(Substance)

##### Predominant *Mahābhūtas*

- *Rasa* (Plasma): *Jala*
- *Rakta* (Blood): *Agni* + *Jala* + *Pr̥thvī*
- *Māmsa* (Muscle) *Pr̥thvī*
- *Meda* (Fat) *Jala* + *Pr̥thvī*
- *Asthi* (Bone) *Pr̥thvī* + *Vāyu*
- *Majjā* (Marrow) *Jala* + *Agni* + *Vāyu*
- *Śukra* (Reproductive tissue) *Jala* + *Pr̥thvī*

### 3. *Trimala* and Pentamerous

#### Composition

Based on the Ayurvedic description:

- *Purīṣa* (Feces) *Pr̥thvī* dominant<sup>9</sup>
- *Mūtra* (Urine) *Jala* dominant, fluid and foul-smelling<sup>9</sup>
- *Sveda* (Sweat) *Jala* + *Agni*, associated with metabolism and thermoregulation<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. The Six Tastes (*Ṣaḍrasa*)

Each taste is constituted by a specific combination of *Mahābhūtas* and influences physiology accordingly.<sup>10</sup>

**Taste (Rasa)** *Mahābhūta*

#### Composition

- *Madhura* (Sweet) : *Pr̥thvī* + *Jala*
- *Amla* (Sour) : *Pr̥thvī* + *Agni*
- *Lavaṇa* (Salty) : *Jala* + *Agni*
- *Kaṭu* (Pungent) : *Agni* + *Vāyu*
- *Tikta* (Bitter) : *Vāyu* + *Ākāśa*
- *Kaṣāya* (Astringent) : *Pr̥thvī* + *Vāyu*

#### 5. The *Pañcabhūtika* Nature of *Marma*

The prognostic classification of *Marma* is based on *Mahābhūta* predominance as described by Suśruta.<sup>11</sup>

- ***Sadyaprāṇahara Marma-***  
Predominance: *Tejas* (Fire)

Description: Causes immediate death when injured.<sup>11</sup>

Sanskrit: “*Sadyaprāṇaharaṇi āgneyāni*”

Meaning: Marmas dominated by fire element have the property of causing immediate death.

- ***Kālantaraprāṇahara Marma-***  
Predominance: *Pr̥thvī* (Earth) + *Tejas* (Fire)

Description: Leads to delayed death.<sup>11</sup>

Sanskrit: “*Kālantaraprāṇaharaṇi saumya-agneyāni*”

Meaning: Marmas having combined earth and fire qualities result in delayed fatality.

- ***Viśalyaprāṇahara Marma-***  
Predominance: *Vāyu* (Air)

Description: Life continues until the removal of the foreign body (*Śalya*).<sup>11</sup>

Sanskrit: “*Viśalyaprāṇaharaṇi vāyavyāni*”

Meaning: Marmas dominated by the air element cause death immediately after removing the embedded object.

- ***Vaikalyakara Marma-***  
Predominance: *Pr̥thvī* (Earth)

Description: Injury causes deformity or loss of function, not death.

Sanskrit: “*Vaikalyakarāṇi saumyāni*”

Meaning: Marmas dominated by the earth element result in disability or structural deformity Results in deformity or loss of function.<sup>11</sup>

- ***Rujākara Marma-***Predominance: *Agni*(Fire) + *Vāyu* (Air)

Description: Injury leads to severe pain, not death or deformity.

Sanskrit: “*Rujākarāṇi agni-vāyu guṇa-bhūyiṣṭha*”

Meaning: Marmas with predominant fire and air qualities produce intense pain when injured. Produces severe pain.<sup>11</sup>

## The Five Great Elements and Their Associations

The relationship between *Mahābhūta*, sense organs, motor organs, and sensory objects forms the basis of Ayurvedic sensory physiology.<sup>12</sup>

Element ( <i>Mahabhuta</i> )	Sense Organ ( <i>Jñānendriya</i> )	Motor Organ ( <i>Karmendriya</i> )	Sensory Object ( <i>Viśaya</i> )
Ether ( <i>Ākāśa</i> )	Ear ( <i>Śrotra</i> )	Speech organ ( <i>Vāk</i> )	Sound ( <i>Śabda</i> )
Air ( <i>Vāyu</i> )	Skin ( <i>Tvak</i> )	Hands ( <i>Pāñj</i> )	Touch ( <i>Sparśa</i> )
Fire ( <i>Tejas/Agni</i> )	Eyes ( <i>Cakṣu</i> )	Feet ( <i>Pāda</i> )	Form/vision ( <i>Rūpa</i> )
Water ( <i>Jala/Ap</i> )	Tongue ( <i>Jihvā</i> )	Anus ( <i>Pāyu</i> )	Taste ( <i>Rasa</i> )
Earth ( <i>Prthvī</i> )	Nose ( <i>Ghrāṇa</i> )	Genitals ( <i>Upastha</i> )	Smell ( <i>Gandha</i> )

## Panchabhautika Classification of Agni and Its Functional States

Digestive strength (*Agni*) varies according to *Doṣa* and *Mahābhūta* dominance.<sup>8 13</sup>

Agni State	Dominant Doṣa	Mahabhuta Dominance	Characteristics
<i>Vishama Agni</i>	<i>Vata</i>	<i>Vāyu + Ākāśa</i>	Irregular digestion, gas, distention
<i>Tikshna Agni</i>	<i>Pitta</i>	<i>Tejas</i>	Excess heat, fast digestion, hyperacidity
<i>Manda Agni</i>	<i>Kapha</i>	<i>Jala + Prthvī</i>	Slow digestion, heaviness, lethargy
<i>Samāgni</i>	Balanced <i>Tridoṣa</i>	Balanced <i>Panchamahabhuta</i>	Optimal digestion and metabolism

## Summary and Conclusion

This review elucidates the Ayurvedic concept of the *Pañchamahābhūta* as a foundational framework for understanding human anatomy and physiology. The five elements—*Ākāśa*, *Vāyu*, *Agni*, *Jala*, and *Prthvī*—collectively govern bodily structure, movement, metabolism,

cohesion, and sensory perception. Classical constructs such as *Tridoṣa*, *Saptadhātu*, *Trimala*, *Ṣaḍrasa*, *Marma*, *Indriya-Viśaya* relationships, and functional states of *Agni* are explained through elemental predominance and correlated with modern anatomical and physiological principles. This integrative interpretation highlights

Ayurveda's systems-oriented approach, where structure and function are inseparable, supporting its relevance in contemporary medical education, research, and integrative healthcare practice.<sup>2 3 5</sup>

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