

ISSN: 2456-4419

Impact Factor: (RJIF): 5.18

Yoga 2019; 4(1): 981-984

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www.theyogicjournal.com

Received: 14-11-2018

Accepted: 16-12-2018

**Pushpinder Singh**

Research Scholar, Department of Physical Education, Punjabi University Patiala, Punjab, India

## Who are we?

### Pushpinder Singh

#### Abstract

We can learn the answer to this question by observing, hypothesizing, experimenting, and analyzing. We are complex living beings in a complex, contradictory, ever-changing world. We know that we do not understand everything about ourselves, but by using modern scientific and ancient philosophical methods we can keep learning more and more.

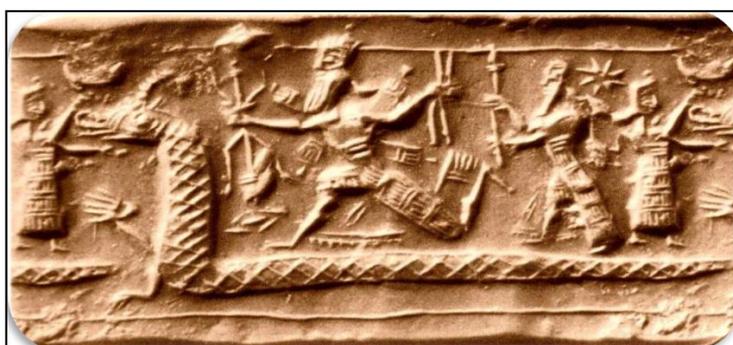
**Keywords:** Ancient Indian, greek philosophy, babylonian mythology, Enuma Elis

#### Introduction

We can learn the answer to this question by observing, hypothesizing, experimenting, and analyzing. We are complex living beings in a complex, contradictory, ever-changing world. We know that we do not understand everything about ourselves, but by using modern scientific and ancient philosophical methods we can keep learning more and more.

#### The Ancient Indian and Greek Philosophy

Ancient Greek and Indian philosophy describes four classical or basic elements of creation and life. These elements are named as earth, water, air and fire. Sometime a fifth element Aether (quintessence) is also included. In the Western tradition, the concept originated from Babylonian mythology. Enuma Elis, a text written in 1800-1600 BC, describes five cosmic elements as the sea, earth, fire, sky and wind. (Singh, 2013) [6]



**Fig 1:** Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal impression from the 18<sup>th</sup> BC identified by several sources as a possible depiction of the slaying of Tiamat from the 'Enuma Elis'.

(Willis, 2012 & Bromily, 1988) [5, 11]

The ancient Greeks did a lot of philosophizing about the nature of the First Matter (which they called 'hyle'), and it from that thought the doctrine of the four elements emerged. The first philosopher to formalize these principles was Empedocles, a Greek philosopher and healer who lived around 450 BC. Empedocles called these the four "roots". In his *Tetrasomia* ("Doctrine of the Four Elements"), he stated that all matter is comprised of four roots (elements): Earth, Water, Air, and Fire.

**Correspondence**

**Pushpinder Singh**

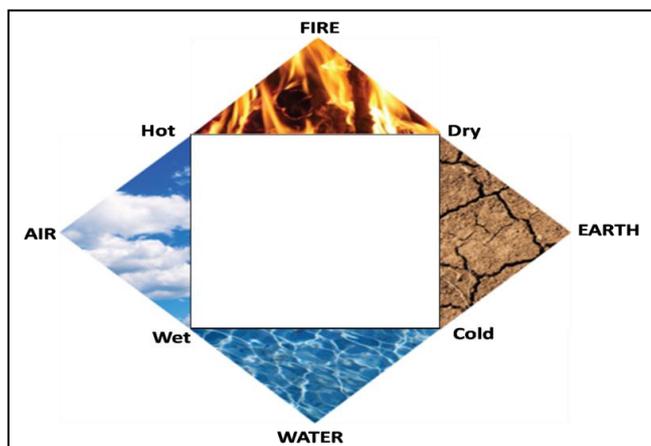
Research Scholar, Department of Physical Education, Punjabi University Patiala, Punjab, India

Plato (424 BC – 348 BC), was first to use the term “element” in reference to air, fire, earth, and water. The Greek word for element, ‘stoicheion’ meant “smallest division”, a smallest unit from which a word/thing is formed”.

Aristotle added fifth element ‘Aether’ (Space) reasoning that the stars must be made of a different, unchangeable, heavenly substance. (Singh, 2013) [6]

According to Empedocles, Fire and Air are “outwardly reaching” elements, reaching up and out, whereas Earth and Water turn inward and downward. In his view, and that of later alchemists, the elements are not only material substances but also spiritual essences. To show their archetypal power, Empedocles associated each element with a god. “Hera rules the fruitful earth,” he wrote. “Hades the central fire, Zeus the luminescent air, and Persephone the mollifying water.”

Aristotle (350 BC) further developed the theories of Empedocles by explaining them in terms of their qualities. In his view, the elements arose from the interplay of the ideal (or archetypal) properties of hotness and coldness, and dryness and wetness. Fire (dry and hot) and Water (wet and cold) are polar opposites, as are Earth (dry and cold) and Air (wet and hot). Wet and dry are the primary qualities. Wet (moistness) is the quality of fluidity or flexibility, which allows a thing to adapt to its external conditions, whereas Dry (dryness) is the quality of rigidity, which allows a thing to define its own shape and bounds. As a consequence Wet things tend to be volatile and expansive, since they can fill spaces in their surroundings, whereas Dry things are fixed and structured, since they define their own form. Aristotle predicted that one material could be transformed into another by altering the mix of its archetypal elements and their qualities. (Fathi Habashi, 2002 & Dennis William Hauck, 2008) [3, 2]



**Fig 2:** The four elements with their qualities as represented in book “A History of Chemistry” (J. R. Partington, 1970)

### Panch Tattva or Bhutas—A Perspective of Various Religions

In Hinduism Pancha Mahabhuta (five great elements) are named as bhumi (earth), jala (water), Agni (fire), pavan (air), shunya or akash (void or aether). All the creation (including human being) is made up of these five basic elements. Upon death, the human body dissolves into these elements, balancing the cycle of nature. Akasha, the most subtle element, was used to create the other four elements. Each element created is in turn used to create the next element, each less subtle than the last.

In Tibetan Philosophy five elemental processes of earth, water, fire, air and space are the essential materials of all existent phenomena. The physical properties assigned to these

elements are earth (solidity); water (cohesion); fire (temperature); air (motion); space (spatial dimension). From the five elements arise the five senses and the five fields of sensual experience. They are the five primary pranas or vital energies. They are the constituents of every physical, sensual, mental, and spiritual phenomenon.

In Japanese tradition these elements of Nature are called as ‘go dai’, literally ‘five great’. These elements are earth, water, fire, wind/air, and void. Earth represented things that were solid. Water represented things that were liquid. Fire represented things that destroy. Air represented things that moved. Void or Spirit represented things not of our everyday life.

In Taoism five elements (or phases) are slightly different than their classical counterpart. These elements are - Earth, Water, Fire, Metal and Wood. Here air is replaced with Qi, which is a force or energy rather than an element. According to Taoism, Universe consists of heaven and earth. The heaven is made of Qi and earth is made of five elements. Yin, Yang and five elements are recurring themes in the oldest Chinese classical text I Ching. The Doctrine of five phases describes two cycles of balance, a generating or creation cycle and an overcoming or destruction cycle of interactions between the phases.

In Chinese tradition a somewhat different series of elements, namely Fire, Earth, Water, Metal and Wood. These were understood as different types of energy in a state of constant interaction and flux with one another, rather than the different kinds of material. Although, usually translated as ‘element’, the Chinese word Xing literally means something like ‘changing states of being’. These elements were seen as ever changing and moving forces or energies. One translation of wu xing is simply ‘the five changes’.

In Pali Literature, the mahabhuta (great elements) or catudhatu (four elements) are earth, water, fire and air. Four primary material elements are the sensory qualities; solidity (earth), fluidity (water), temperature (fire), mobility (air). With these elements, one observes how a physical thing is sensed, felt, perceived. Thanissaro Bhikku (1997) renders an extract of Shakyamuni Buddha's from Pali into English thus: 'In this body there is the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, & the wind property.'

In Sikhism, panch tattva (five classical or basic elements) are ap (water), tej (fire), vaaye (air), pirthmi (earth) and akash (aether). Gurbani describes that the Creator created all these elements from the Primal Void. It elaborates that all of creation, including the human body, is made up of these five basic elements. Upon death, the human body dissolves into these five elements, thereby balancing the cycle of Nature.

ਅਪੁ ਤੇਜੁ ਵਾਇ ਪ੍ਰਿਥਮੀ ਆਕਾਸਾ ॥

ਤਿਨ ਮਹਿ ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਘਰਿ ਵਾਸਾ ॥

(Guru Nanak Dev Ji, n.d.)

Water, fire, air, earth and aether,

In that house of the five elements, they dwell.

(Guru Nanak Dev Ji, nd.)

However Panch Tattva is a classical concept to explain the phenomenon of the world and life. The above referred religious philosophies, although differ in many details, yet they all emphasize the basic unity of the universe, through the recognition of Panch Tattva as the basis of creation. It is pointed out that through a continuous exchange between these elements and the creation, the cycles of creation and destruction are balanced. Thus the knowledge of Panch Tattva, makes us aware of the unity and mutual interrelation

of all things. It helps us to transcend the notion of an isolated individual self and to identify ourselves with the ultimate reality. (Singh, 2013) <sup>[6]</sup>

### **Present Scenario of Pancha Bhutas**

Whether you want to know pleasure or you want to know bliss, for both your system has to become willing. If you want to know pleasure, your mind should come to a certain state of willingness and your physical body should be in a certain level of sensitivity. If you want to know the bliss of being one with something larger than yourself, once again your body has to cooperate. Whether it is the individual human body or the larger cosmic body, essentially, they are made of five elements – earth, water, fire, air and space. In this, the first four elements are the active participants—space is the catalytic force. It is in the lap of this boundless space that these four elements play the game. So, the pancha bhutas are the five elements of nature.

What you call “myself” is just a mischief of these five elements. If you want to realize the full potential of this mechanism that you call a human being or if you want to transcend this one and become one with the larger, cosmic mechanism, you need their cooperation. Unless you have a certain amount of mastery over these five elements you can neither know the pleasure of the individual self nor the blissfulness of the cosmic being.

The fundamental sadhana in yoga to gain mastery over these five elements or to purify the elements in the system in such a way that they cooperate, is referred to as bhuta shuddhi. If these five elements don't cooperate, you can struggle as much as you want, nothing happens. Only with their cooperation, from the basic aspects to the highest aspect, your life becomes a possibility. This human system is like a doorway. A door has two aspects to it – if you are always facing closed doors, for you doors mean that which stops you. If doors are opening up for you, then for you a door means a possibility of entering into something. In either case, it is the same door; which side of the door you are on decides everything about your life, even in terms of time and space. Whether you experience this body as a great possibility or a great barrier simply depends on the extent these five elements are cooperating.

India is a land which has seen that kind of sadhana, focus, understanding and mastery for a very long time. For the five elements in nature, there are five temples, which are all geographically located within the Deccan Plateau – four in Tamil Nadu, and one in Andhra Pradesh. These temples were created not for worship, but for Sadhana. People moved from one temple to the other to do Sadhana on each of the five elements. At one temple, they did Sadhana on earth, then, they went to the next temple to do Sadhana on water, and so on. Unfortunately, this connection is not there anymore because the Sadhana atmosphere has been taken away. This understanding and mastery is generally missing, but the temples still exist. Some of them have maintained that vibrance and quality, while some of them have become weak.

In Isha Yoga, every Sadhana has something to do with organizing these five elements in such a way that you can reap the best out of the individual being and the cosmic nature because both are just a play of these five elements. Whether this individual physical body becomes a stepping stone for your ultimate possibility or a hurdle towards that essentially depends on how you are able to deal with these five elements. What you are right now is just a little bit of earth, water, air and temperature. All the ingredients are out there in the garden; it just takes a little divine touch to make these four

things into a throbbing human being.

Sitting here, if you are aware of how the water, air, earth and fire in your body are functioning, suddenly you live your life with so much ease, people start thinking you are superhuman. But this is not about being superhuman – this is about realizing that being human is super. Being human is super if only you learn to use your humanity and this human mechanism as a possibility, not as a barrier. (Sadguru, 2012) <sup>[7]</sup>

### **Prospective of Modern Science about Human Existence**

The five elements of nature are basically classical in nature and are not resonant with the concept of element as referred in modern science. According to modern science, air is a mixture of several gaseous elements and compounds, water is a compound, earth or soil is also a mixture of several solid compounds. Fire is electromagnetic energy. Aether or Akasha is closest parallel to space-time continuum. An element is made up of atoms. An atom is the smallest division of a substance to exist independently, and contains the characteristics of the substance. Scientists have discovered that there are 92 naturally occurring elements. For example Helium gas is an element. A compound is made up of two or more elements. For example water is a compound of oxygen and hydrogen elements. Thus these classical elements cannot be treated as elements in the modern sense.

The human body is organized into various levels that begin at the very small and basic and come together to form the complete body whose different parts work in unison. This can be seen as a kind of ‘ladder’ going from the basic to the very complex. At the simplest level, the body is comprised of atoms.

The human body is the entire structure of a human being and comprises a head, neck, trunk which includes the thorax and abdomen, two arms and hands and two legs and feet. Every part of the body is composed of various types of cell. By the time the human reaches adulthood, the body consists of close to 100 trillion cells, the basic unit of life. These cells are organized biologically to eventually form the whole body.

The basic unit of body structure is the cell. It is like one brick of a wall. All cells need food, water, and oxygen to live and function. As cells use or metabolize food and oxygen they give off carbon dioxide and other wastes. The cell is comprised of the cell membrane, which is the outer covering; it encloses the cell and helps it hold its shape. The nucleus is the control centre. It directs the cell's activities. Cytoplasm surrounds the nucleus. Organelles are structures that are suspended in the cytoplasm. The protoplasm refers to all structures, substances and water within the cell.

The human body consists of many interacting systems. Each system contributes to the maintenance of homeostasis, of itself, other systems, and the entire body. A system consists of organs, which are functional collections of tissue. Systems do not work in isolation, and the well-being of the person depends upon the well-being of all the interacting body systems.

### **Conclusion**

“This is not about Being Superhuman –  
This is about Realizing that Being Human is super.”  
(Sadguru, 2015) <sup>[8]</sup>

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