

**Elemental Movement: A Somatic Approach to  
Movement Education**

by  
**Rae Johnson**

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*Elemental Movement:*  
*A Somatic Approach to Movement Education*

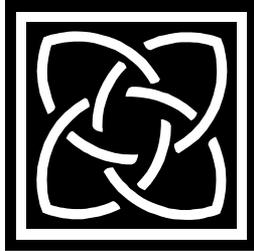
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# Introduction

*In a movement studio in a large Canadian city, a group of women and men are lying on the floor in a circle, arranged like the spokes of a wheel. In the center of the wheel are four objects - an earthenware bowl full of stones, a basin of water, a candle, and a feather. The faint scent of greenery hangs in the air. Over the distant mechanized drone of city traffic, the living human sounds of breath and sigh can be heard.*

*Almost imperceptibly at first, the group begins to move. Silently, a leg lengthens along the floor. A shoulder settles in its socket. With eyes closed and faces reflecting a quiet inner focus, the women and men perform a series of movements. Every person's movement is different, but each reflects a quality of weight, directed intent, and a clear relationship with gravity. They move as if embracing the Earth, reestablishing a connection they had somehow lost.*

*Then music fills the room, and the group begins to dance. The movers dance from their bones and their guts, shaping themselves into sticks and stones and bowls of Jell-O. With arms reaching and feet thumping, they create expressions of their unique and common anatomy. They follow the music's thundering rhythm and echo it, using the curves and hollows of their bodies as percussion instruments. Tracing a spiral on the ground with their steps, the movers connect hands and follow a line of linked bodies that curls and uncurls as each member of the group passes next to every other.*

*When the music ends, the group sits in a circle on the floor to share with each other what the moving was like. One woman shows a drawing of her feet she drew during a break. She talks about how she used to think her feet were ugly, but likes them better now she can see and feel how strong and articulate they are. A man describes how hard it was just to allow himself to lie on the floor - as if he couldn't quite trust the ground to hold him if he really let go. More than a few people are breathing from deeper in their bellies, and seem more solid than when they arrived. Before everyone gets ready to head home for the evening, they are encouraged to recognize traces of tonight's experience imbedded in their day-to-day experience.*

*The members of the group came to this session from very different places, literally and figuratively. Some have come from the*

*competitive environment of the business world, and use the session to help them unravel the stress of the day. Others work in the helping professions - education, social work, or healthcare - and come here to refocus on their own personal needs and experiences, as a form of professional self-care. Still others are students of yoga, dance, or massage. Many are in the later stages of healing from various types of injury - either physical, emotional, or both - and use the sessions as part of an overall program of recovery. Despite their diversity in terms of age, culture, ability, profession, and personal experience, all share a desire to become more aware of their bodily experience, and to share that experience in a collective setting.*

*When the group meets again next week, the dance will be much different - lighter, more fluid, less direct. In the following month, they will move from five unique and distinct body/mind states, each of them inspired by a different Element - Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and Ether. Using the Elements as a framework for their explorations, they will discover new movement pathways to being grounded, flexible, inspired, passionate, and transformed. They are engaged in a process of physical, psychological, and spiritual exploration called Somatic Alchemy , and are learning one of the methods of that process - Elemental Movement .*

## What is *Somatic Alchemy* ?

## What is *Elemental Movement* ?

Although the terms *Somatic Alchemy* and *Elemental Movement* may evoke ideas and images that hint at many layers of meaning - perhaps suggesting movement, mystery, and transformation - they are used here to refer to specific concepts and methods. They were created to describe a body of work developed out of my own personal and professional explorations as a movement educator, and it is the exploration and elaboration of this particular approach that forms the basis of this text. Although the *Elemental Movement* session described on the preceding pages offers an illustration of this work, some working definitions of *Somatic Alchemy* and *Elemental Movement* are necessary before moving further into the text.

*Somatic Alchemy* is a process based on the integration of two different fields of study - somatics and alchemy. Somatics is a term coined by Thomas Hanna (1970) to refer to a group of bodywork disciplines sharing a common perspective that privileges the internal subjective experience of the body. In the West, early pioneers of these disciplines shared a concern for the discrepancy they found between the "aliveness" of felt bodily experience and the relative "deadness" of conventional approaches to exercise, dance, and physical manipulation (Johnson, 1995, p. xi). As they began to question commonly accepted notions of the body and healing, they developed approaches that included and honored what was, for them, the missing dimension of embodiment - the full experience of the self as a living body. These new ways of working with the body, begun around the turn of this century in Europe and America, included the Sensory Awareness work of Elsa Gindler and Charlotte Selver, the German Gymnastik of Mensendieck and Kallmeyer, and the Alexander Technique of Frederick Matthias Alexander (Green, 1996). In mid-century America, influences from Eastern holistic practices furthered the evolution of somatics, and the scope of somatic practice was broadened to include Tai Chi, Aikido, and Yoga (Hanna, 1976). Today, many other schools are also widely

considered somatic in orientation, such as Feldenkrais Method®, Continuum, Aston-Patterning®, Rubenfeld Synergy®, Trager®, and Body-Mind Centering®.

Alchemy - the second dimension of Somatic Alchemy - is the ancient art and science that seeks to understand the essential principles that underlie the form and function of the cosmos, and its symbols are deeply imbedded in the philosophical and religious traditions of many cultures. Alchemy is a multifaceted subject, and can be understood as a proto-chemistry, offering unique approaches to the preparation of medicinal remedies, as a source of psychological symbolism, in which the archetypal structure of human thought and feeling is illuminated, as an allegorical exploration of the journey of the human soul, and as a newly recognized influence on the world view of important writers, philosophers, and artists throughout history (MacLean, 1999). In this context, alchemy also refers more generally to the process of changing something ordinary into something special. The rationale underpinning this alchemical process dissolves traditional conceptual divisions between the contemplative and practical, as the practice of alchemy works with the physical as spiritual, and vice versa. In current terms, this process is both therapeutic and educational in nature, and involves an awareness and integration of the multiform aspects and properties of reality/experience. Thus, Somatic Alchemy is a process of transforming the *soma*, or the body as experienced from within. It is the theory and methodology in which the actual practice of Elemental Movement is grounded.

Elemental Movement is movement-centered practice based on the five Elements - Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and Ether - which are primary symbols in most alchemical traditions (MacLean, 1999). Using the Elements as a framework and as a set of symbolic tools, Elemental Movement employs movement as the primary vehicle for a wide range of personal explorations. On a physical level, the Elements provide a map for exploring different body systems and movement qualities. They are also used as instruments in the development of a high resolution body image and an expanded movement repertoire. On a psychological level, the Elements represent different aspects of the self that can be accessed and expressed through movement. Working with the

Elements as archetypes (or primal symbolic patterns of human experience), Elemental Movement echoes the psychological process of individuation through active imagination, expressed as movement (Von Franz, 1992). The improvisational movement structures also provide an outlet for creative and emotional expression. On a spiritual level, Elemental Movement serves as a form of moving meditation, drawing on the capacity of certain types of movement to transform ordinary states of consciousness into transcendent experience (Serlin, 1993). Because the Elements have been sacred icons in many religious and spiritual systems, the contemplation of them through movement can also serve a liturgical function (Starhawk, 1989; Walker, 1988).

The rationale that underlies the practice of Elemental Movement is both simple and multifaceted. The basic premise is somatic in its perspective, and proposes that human functioning and experience is enriched through enhanced self-awareness<sup>1</sup>. In turn, increased awareness promotes freedom of behavior through an increase in the range of choices available to us in response to inner needs and the demands of our environment (Green, 1996). Therefore, the fundamental objective of Somatic Alchemy as expressed through Elemental Movement is an increased ability to use oneself fully - to respond effectively, fluidly, and with pleasure to the challenges of being alive.

The first section of this book will offer a deeper look at Somatic Alchemy, with an emphasis on describing its historical and theoretical underpinnings. In laying the foundation for this

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<sup>1</sup> Somatic movement therapy and education, as defined by the International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association (ISMETA), is a movement-centered approach that utilizes a range of techniques to help clients and students recognize and improve psycho-physical and cognitive-motor movement patterns and stress-related emotional conditions. These techniques include physiological repatterning to enhance awareness and usage of various body systems (i.e. perceptual, muscular, skeletal, neurological, etc.), movement analysis to optimize one's movement potential through exploration of various movement patterns and qualities, and facilitating psychological and emotional expression through exploring the non-verbal dimensions of human interaction in terms of emotional and psychological attitudes and relationships.

exploration, it is important to acknowledge that this work has its roots in many fields, and most of them will only be cultivated here in a very specific context. The primary focus throughout is how a particular set of symbols - the Elements - are used as the medium and instruments in changing internal felt perception. The resource section at the end of the book offers some suggestions to those wishing to pursue further research into the areas of somatics, alchemy, or movement therapy.

The second section focuses on the practice of Elemental Movement itself. Divided into five main chapters - one for each of the Elements - it includes an explanation of the overall structure of an Elemental Movement session as well as offering detailed movement experiments for each Element. These experiential sections are prefaced by relevant background material designed to elaborate on the themes embodied by the movement structures, and to offer a broader context in which to understand them. Some of the topics woven into these chapters include experiential anatomy, contemplative movement, breathwork, sensory awareness, and authentic movement.

Before moving into the main text, however, some mention of the personal dimensions of the development of Somatic Alchemy and Elemental Movement is in order. The process of engaging in this work can be a deeply personal one, and I thought it important that the reader be able to connect a description of it to some sense of the real person who conceived it. To that end, I offer here a brief history of the heuristic inquiry that led to this manuscript. I also believe in articulating my personal biases when offering ideas up for consideration, especially when suggesting those ideas be explored experientially, as I am in this manuscript. The perspectives I work from are named and described here initially, so that they may be more easily recognizable as they appear in context later on.

I have used movement as my primary medium of personal expression, therapeutic exploration, and spiritual practice for as long as I can remember. As a child, I danced my imagination and let movement reveal emotions I had no words for - stomping and sweeping and whirling as a way of understanding and expressing myself. In addition to the personal expression it

offered, movement also conferred the rare and precious gift of transcendent experience. Despite my youthful inexperience with life's spiritual dimension, I understood in my bones that the sacred was, for me, a bodily experience. Movement was the medium that confirmed my connection to something universal while simultaneously validating my authentic personal identity. Wordlessly, these mysterious and deeply inspiring experiences reminded me who I was, and why I was alive. I began to seek them out, and to find out how to recreate them instead of simply waiting and hoping for them to happen.

Over the years, I explored what I believed were the underlying components of these experiences, studying psychology, philosophy, spirituality, and the movement arts. My clinical work as a therapist and as a movement educator lent weight and depth to my understanding, but I was still searching for a reliable method for eliciting transcendence through movement. My explorations led me to investigate the pagan spiritual practices of my ancestors, and I discovered that, like alchemists, my forebears understood my transcendent experiences as *ethereal* in a very different sense of the word than I did. They saw the ethereal not as something that appeared magically out of thin air, but very practically as something that was made up of four basic Elements. Ether, or ethereal experience, could be created through unifying these Elements.

If Ether emerges as a result of the balanced integration of Earth, Water, Air, and Fire, then the ethereal movement experiences I sought should be generated by embodying these Elements in a balanced way. My knowledge of somatic psychology suggested that we *do* embody the aspects of our environment that are significant to us, and an almost universal ancient philosophy asserted that our bodies were already composed of these basic Elements anyway, although not necessarily in equilibrium. With these thoughts in mind, I began to formulate the following questions - How do we embody the Elements? Does the balanced and integrated embodiment of the Elements facilitate Ethereal experience? Using the tools of exploration acquired through my training in psychotherapy and movement education, I began to play with the Elements through movement. Over the years, Somatic Alchemy and Elemental

Movement grew out of these explorations. As these ideas and practices developed, they evolved into something that, for me, transcended the initial impetus.

As an approach to somatic education, Somatic Alchemy and Elemental Movement reflect a synthesis of dozens of approaches to therapy, personal growth, and movement education I have encountered and assimilated over the past several decades. Despite these myriad influences, however, there is a single essential thread that runs through this work, and informs every exercise and explanation contained within it. This fundamental premise - one that I call a *feminist somatic* perspective - sees the body and our relationship to it as key to personal and social transformation (Johnson, 1996). Feminism has been instrumental in recognizing the deep imprint left by all forms of violence and oppression. In her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Lewis Herman makes critical connections between different forms of violence, and draws parallels between the private violence experienced in the lives of women and children, and the public violence of war and terrorism. She asserts that there are important relationships between our personal experiences and the political context in which they occur, and that the legacy of various forms of trauma touches every facet of our society.

Somatic theorists suggest that this legacy is perhaps most strongly felt in our bodies, and the massive global incidence of war, politically directed torture, famine, rape, and domestic violence in this century indicates a "...criminal disregard for the muscle fibers, fluids, and neural networks in which we live" (Johnson, 1995, p.ix). In that respect, this work is offered as a tool for healing and reclaiming our bodies for ourselves, and understands this process as both a personal and political act. My feminist somatic bias also has important implications for how I present this material - my intent is to offer something that can be used by others to create for themselves the changes they would like to make in their bodies and their lives. This text is a map for guided self-exploration, not a manual for effecting predetermined ideals, and designed more as inspiration than instruction.

In that spirit, it is possible to trace some of the lines on this map back to their places of origin, and discover that the central

concepts at work in Somatic Alchemy and Elemental Movement are actually very old. Both the idea that personal and collective transformation can be effected through movement, and that the Elements can serve as symbols of microcosmic and macrocosmic change are rooted in ancient beliefs and practices (Serlin, 1993; Walker, 1986; Godagama, 1997). This section begins by tracing the Elements over time, between cultures, and through the often intersecting fields of alchemy and psychology.

# Ancient Alchemy: The Elements Through the Ages

The Elements have served as essential cosmic principles and as tools of transformation for many thousands of years in the ancient civilizations of China, India, and Greece. Each developed unique ways of working with the Elements in order to effect and understand change. These Elementary ideas and explorations can be found in the foundations of the philosophy, chemistry, and medicine of these cultures. Originally, these disciplines were not separate and distinct fields of study, but were embraced by a single multifaceted pursuit called alchemy (MacLean, 1999). Stated simply, alchemy is the study of the nature and working of the universe, and early alchemists were the philosophers, healers, and scientists of their day. Because this search for the keys to universal change possessed both tangible and abstract dimensions, alchemical practice reflects these two different streams of emphasis. One of the most common misperceptions about alchemy is that it is exclusively concerned with the mundane objective of turning base metals into gold. Although practical alchemists did pursue this goal for thousands of years, and in so doing invented much of the laboratory apparatus and procedures still in modified use today, internal alchemists pursued knowledge of the cosmos through a deeper understanding of the workings of the human body, mind, and spirit.

The alchemical and philosophical schools of these early cultures devised many types of symbols in the course of their investigations, but the Elements are the symbols that form the heart of their cosmologies (MacLean, 1999; Godagama, 1997; Walker, 1986). In each culture, these universal building blocks have evolved differently. In China, they are fundamental to the ancient text of the *I Ching*<sup>2</sup> (Walker, 1986), but a slightly different

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<sup>2</sup> The *I Ching* (pronounced Yee-Jing) is an ancient Chinese text comprised of philosophical, astrological, and symbolical writings. One of the four pillars of Taoism, it uses 64 hexagrams, or symbolic representations of human experience, to illustrate the laws of universal change (Chang, 1978).

set of Elements is employed in Chinese alchemy and medicine (Pregadio, 1999). In India, the Elements are central to the practice of Ayurvedic medicine, and remain an active conceptual component of modern health care in that country. In the West, the Elements have undergone various developments in the hands of Greek philosophers, Sufi poets, and medieval alchemists. Sometimes the Elements are seen, as did Aristotle, as actual physical substances. Other times, as with Chinese alchemy, they are viewed more as metaphysical forces (Conder, 1999). Despite these shifts in usage, emphasis, and conceptualization, the Elements have retained an essential character that is recognizable from one culture and era to the next. It is this underlying essence that I hope to draw out and make visible as we travel into the history of the Elements.

## **The Chinese Elements**

### **Elemental Children.**

In the beginning, there was Chaos. Like the creation myths of ancient Egypt, Greece, Persia, and India, the Chinese story of the Elements begins here, with the primal soup. Essentially matrifocal in perspective, this prehistoric mythos conceives of the beginning of the world as a process of birth, and of all things as children of a primordial Mother. Whether known as Kali-Maya (in India), Temu (in Egypt), Tiamat (in Babylon), or Nu-Kua (in China), this cosmic Mother was initially without form or boundary. Conceived of as a dark semi-liquid mass of undifferentiated potential matter and energy, this Original Source began to dance, and through her rhythmic movement generated the energy to coagulate the homogeneous expanse of the universe into separate, differentiated, and ordered components (Walker, 1986, pp. 1-6).

To the prehistoric Chinese, the first "children" born of the Great Mother were the Elements, and formed a cosmic family - mother Earth and father Sky, with their children Water, Sea, Fire, Thunder, Breath, and Mountain (Legge, 1964, p.350; Walker, 1986, p.5; Wing, 1982, p. 15). In this family, each of the four primary

Elements in its purest essence is paired with a representation of itself as expressed and experienced on a earthly level. In this way, a symbol set is developed that includes both the transcendent Elemental spirit as well as its more mundane form. Breath is the intermediary of Father Heaven or Air, Mountain the material form of Mother Earth, Fire is manifested as Thunder, and Sea is Water's expression on a more human scale (Walker, 1986, p.5). The concept of the Elements as children and as inextricably related to one another as are members of the same family stems from this early stage in the development of Chinese metaphysics, and endures in many current systems.

### Elements as Polarities.

Considered one of the oldest established schools of Chinese religious and philosophical thought, Taoism represents an abstraction and elaboration on the anthropomorphic depiction of the cosmos in earlier myth. Here, the universe is conceived of as the final stage in a series of spontaneous transformations from an originally unified Void. According to Neo-Confucian scholar Chu Hsi (c.1200),

*In the beginning, before any being existed, there was only Li, then when it moved it generated the Yang and when it rested it generated the Yin. Upon reaching the extremest point of rest it began to move once more, and at the extremest point of motion it began to return to rest once more..*

*(Bender, 1997, p. 1)*

These movements generated the separation of the Tao into the two complementary, dynamically interacting polarities called Yin and Yang - expansion and contraction, inhalation and exhalation, light and dark, active and receptive, male and female. This process of separation and transformation of matter began an eternal cycle of "becoming" that governs all life. The cycle of Yin and Yang is depicted in the classic Taoist symbol that shows them

endlessly pouring into each other while containing the seed of their antithesis in their deepest core. Yin and Yang both create and destroy one another, and this paradoxical cycle of change is at the heart of Taoist belief.



According to Taoist theory, Yin and Yang combine to produce the four Hsiang (or Diagrams), which in turn produce eight Pa Kua (or Trigrams). This evolving differentiation of the cosmos is simpler to conceptualize when represented graphically - Yin is denoted by a broken straight line, indicating its receptive nature; a solid line represents Yang. The four Diagrams are all the possible combinations of Ying and Yang in a two-line arrangement, and the Trigrams all the possible combinations of Yin and Yang in a three-line arrangement. The Eight Elemental Trigrams are arranged using the same simple but elegantly logical binary system used by modern computers.

When each of these basic units is paired with every other unit in an grouping that arranges one trigram directly above the other (as a six-lined figure, or hexagram), all the possible combinations and arrangements of these eight trigrams become the 64 hexagrams found in the I Ching, the ancient Chinese Book of Changes. The "changes" refer to the continual process of transformation of the Elements that continue to be generated by the rhythms of the dancing universe. By observing these cosmic rhythms as manifested in the changing seasons, tides, and cycles of birth and death, the Chinese were able to identify the universal principles that govern change, and classify everything in the universe in terms of its composite nature. A table of correspondences for the Pa Kua is offered below to indicate the complex layering of meaning inherent in the system. Far from being arbitrary assignments of meaning, these correspondences were carefully developed through an analysis of the composition of each Pa Kua in terms of their essential Yin/Yang qualities.



## Table of Correspondences of the Elements in the I Ching

<u>Name</u>	<u>Element</u>	<u>Relations</u>	<u>Qualities</u>	<u>Body Part</u>	<u>Season</u>	<u>Direction</u>
Ch'ien	Heaven	father	creative strong light firmness	head	early winter	northwest
Chen	Thunder	eldest son	expansion activity  excitement growth	foot	spring	east
K'an	Water Rain	middle son	danger profound mystery depth	ear	mid winter	north
Ken	Mountain	youngest son	stillness calm stubborn tranquil	hand	late winter	northeast
K'un	Earth	mother	yielding dark receptive nourishing	belly	early autumn	southwest
Sun	Wind	eldest daughter	gentle simple honest penetrating	thigh	early summer	southeast
Li	Fire	middle daughter	clarity intelligence consciousness illuminating	eye	mid summer	south
Tui	Lake	youngest daughter	openness satisfaction fullness pleasure	mouth	late autumn	west

*Chart adapted from Wing, 1982, p.15*

## The Alchemical Microcosm.

The primary source of Chinese alchemical knowledge is the Taoist texts, and the alchemical tradition in China is based on the concepts of Tao and Yin/Yang (Pregadio, 1999). During the early Han dynasty (207 BCE - 9 AD), philosophers attempted to synthesize the many ideologies developed in China over the previous three hundred years, and attempted to derive from the classic texts a unified principle of the workings of the universe. Appended to the I Ching, this new theory was the origin of the Five Agents Wu Hsing school (Hooker, 1996) employed by Chinese alchemy (Pregadio, 1999). Although the Five Agents (or Five Element) theory employs a different set of elements than described in the I Ching (wood, metal, fire, water, earth), the process of integration and transformation reflects the same basic underlying principles of universal change.

The fundamental task of Chinese alchemy is to retrace the process of the creation of the universe backwards - by reuniting the elements of the cosmos into its essence, the Tao (Pregadio, 1995-96). The exploration of the underlying principles of the form and function of the cosmos may be pursued externally, through the practical manipulation of natural substances and compounding of elixirs (known as *waidan*), or internally, through a tradition called *neidan*. Developed as an independent discipline around the beginning of the Tang period, *neidan* views the human body as a microcosm of the larger universe, and seeks to understand the workings and movements of the Tao as they manifest within us. In internal alchemy, the language of the laboratory was applied to the operations realized inside the body (Pregadio, 1999). Although these procedures are described very elusively in the ancient texts, lead is often used as a cover name to describe pure Yang, or knowledge of the Tao. On the other hand, mercury is used to represent the individual mind. Through a process of repeated cyclical procedures carried out in movement and meditation, Yin and Yang are reunited and the final object of internal alchemy is attained - an elixir called *huandan*, or the elixir of return.

In the spirit of the *neidan* school of internal alchemy, the following poem suggests some of the implications in viewing the human body as a microcosm of the larger universe.

*earth mother inside / inside mother earth*

*i am reclaiming my body land  
cells like drops of rain on open fields  
sinking in and drinking deeply of the knowledge in my bones  
i am putting my hands on the planet  
i am lying full length face down into the earth  
and we are revolving in space together  
through me and throughout me  
the mother reconnects us  
this arm...that hill...this ankle  
the wide curve of water and stone that is the belly of the sea  
when i roll over to face the sky  
the depth of it sends me reeling  
i catch my breath  
inhaling sky...exhaling me  
the mother weaves the world and i together  
in the light of day she illuminates me  
in the dark of night she links constellations within my skin  
we both have stars in our eyes as  
she tells me with her body  
and i tell her with mine  
if this is the universe  
we must be home*

# India and the Ayurvedic Elements

Ancient Hindu sacred scriptures, the Vedas, contain the many of the same references to alchemy found in Chinese texts. Similarly, pre-Vedic Tantric mythology views the birth of the cosmos as a function of the Great Mother, with Kali as an ocean of blood giving birth to the Elements as Sanskrit letters (Walker, 1986; Walker, 1988). The sounds of these Elemental letters - *La* (Earth), *Va* (Water), *Ya* (Air) and *Ra* (Fire) - formed the first mantras and brought the universe into existence. The earliest records of Indian natural philosophy, dating from the 5th century BCE, also refer to the Elements, as well as to the concept of polarized forces or energy. As with the Chinese perspective, these polarized forces are seen as complementary rather than antagonistic, and constantly in the process of change and transformation.

## The Healing Elements.

Much of the alchemical experimentation conducted in ancient India centered on the Elements as medicine, and as a way to understand the workings of the human body. The tradition of Ayurvedic medicine that developed from these experiments is several thousands of years old, and continues to be a favored form of health care in India and large parts of the Eastern world (Godagama, 1997).

According to Ayurvedic theory, the body is composed of and governed by the Elements (Godagama, 1997). Earth is the body's flesh and bone, and Water its blood and fluids. Fire affects hunger, thirst, and sleep, Air influences bodily motion, and Ether<sup>3</sup> governs the interspaces of the stomach, heart, and neck. The five senses of the human body also correspond to the Elements - sound is transmitted through Ether, Air influences the sense of touch, Fire allows the perception of sight, Water affects the perception of

---

<sup>3</sup> Ether is the "Element that is not an Element". Rather, it is the elusive quintessence that includes, integrates, and transcends the other four Elements.

taste, and Earth is connected to the sense of smell. In this way an Elemental anatomy and physiology is established.

## **The Constitutional Elements.**

Ayurvedic theory works with the Elements in three basic combinations, and are considered to embody the fundamental principles of the constitution of the human being. Ayurveda teaches that these constitutional types - or *doshas* - combine two of the five Elements: *Vata* is Ether and Air, *Pitta* is Fire and Water, and *Kapha* is Water and Earth. Each individual (indeed, everything in the world) possesses a unique combination of these Elementally-based bio-energies in which one is predominant (Godagama, 1997). One's *dosha* is determined before birth at the moment of conception, and many factors come into play influencing it - including genetic inheritance, astrological conditions, and *karma*. An Ayurvedic practitioner is trained to evaluate one's *dosha* by assessing a wide range of factors, including height, weight, facial features, circulation and pulse rate, sleep and dream patterns, memory and thought patterns, tendency toward types of illness, appetite and preferences for food and drink, and levels of physical activity.

*Vata* energy, composed of Air and Ether, is considered one of the most influential *doshas*, guiding all bodily functions and body movement. *Vata* also corresponds to the nervous system, and could be said to be equivalent to the modern concept of neurotransmitter activity in the brain. It is dry, light, rough, and quick, and *Vata* types tend to be slim, athletic, ethereal, and creative. *Pitta* types, in contrast, are more stable and substantial, with a tendency toward ambitiousness and an appreciation for the good life. As *Pitta* governs the generation and conservation of body heat, digestion, metabolism, those with a predominantly *Pitta* constitution often perspire heavily and tend toward a high body temperature and a strong metabolism. *Kapha*-dominant people tend to be slower, more conservative, and generally less active than the other *doshas*. Governing the Earthy qualities of strength and mass, *Kapha* also regulates the water functions of the body and maintains the immune system (Godagama, 1997).