



Anna, Jala and Vayu as Prāṇa: An Ayurvedic Review of the Three Fundamental Life-Sustaining Elements

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Abstract

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, emphasizes the preservation of health through harmony between the body, mind, senses, and soul. The maintenance of this harmony depends primarily on the uninterrupted availability of *Anna* (food), *Jala* (water), and *Vayu* (air), which are regarded as the fundamental supporters of *Prāṇa*, the vital force responsible for sustaining life. *Prāṇa* is not merely the process of respiration but represents the dynamic life energy governing all physiological, psychological, and metabolic activities. Proper nourishment through wholesome food, adequate hydration with pure water, and continuous intake of clean air collectively maintain *Agni*, nourish the *Dhātus*, preserve *Ojas*, and regulate the functions of *Vāta Doṣa*, thereby ensuring health and longevity. Conversely, impairment in the quality or quantity of any of these three essential elements disturbs homeostasis,

weakens immunity, promotes the formation of *Āma*, and predisposes an individual to various diseases. Although described through different philosophical concepts, modern biomedical science also recognizes nutrition, hydration, and oxygen as the three indispensable requirements for cellular survival and physiological homeostasis. This review explores the *Ayurvedic* concept of *Anna*, *Jala*, and *Vāyu* as the primary sustainers of *Prāṇa*, discusses their physiological importance according to classical Ayurvedic principles, and correlates these concepts with contemporary scientific understanding. The review also highlights the significance of these principles in preventive medicine and lifestyle modification for maintaining holistic health.

Keywords: *Ayurveda, Prāṇa, Anna, Jala, Vāyu, Ahāra, Preventive Medicine, Lifestyle, Holistic Health.*

Aim

To critically review the *Ayurvedic* concept of *Anna* (food), *Jala* (water), and *Vāyu* (air) as the three fundamental life-sustaining elements (*Prāṇa*) and to explore their significance in the maintenance of health and prevention of disease through classical Ayurvedic principles and modern scientific correlation.

Objectives

1. To review the concept of *Prāṇa* as described in classical *Ayurvedic* literature.
2. To study the role of *Anna* in maintaining *Prāṇa*, *Agni*, *Dhātus*, *Ojas*, and overall health.
3. To evaluate the physiological and therapeutic significance of *Jala* in sustaining life and maintaining homeostasis.
4. To analyze the role of *Vāyu*, particularly *Prāṇa Vāta*, in regulating vital physiological functions.
5. To explain the interrelationship between *Anna*, *Jala*, and *Vāyu* in sustaining life according to Ayurvedic principles.
6. To correlate the Ayurvedic concepts of *Anna*, *Jala*, and *Vāyu* with modern scientific knowledge related to nutrition, hydration, respiration, and metabolism.
7. To highlight the importance of these three life-sustaining elements in preventive healthcare, health promotion, and lifestyle modification.
8. To identify the relevance of the *Ayurvedic* concept of *Prāṇa* in addressing contemporary lifestyle

disorders and promoting holistic well-being.

Materials and Methods

The present study is a narrative review based on a comprehensive analysis of classical Ayurvedic literature and modern scientific publications. Information was collected from the principal Ayurvedic compendia, including *Charaka Saṁhita*, *Susruta Saṁhita*, *Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdaya*, and *Aṣṭāṅga Saṅgraha*, along with their authoritative commentaries. Relevant data were also reviewed from modern textbooks of physiology, nutrition, environmental health, preventive medicine, and peer-reviewed research articles indexed in databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and Scopus. The collected information was critically analyzed, organized thematically, and correlated with contemporary biomedical concepts to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of *Anna*, *Jala*, and *Vāyu* in sustaining *Prāṇa* and maintaining health.

Introduction

Concept of Health and *Prāṇa* in *Ayurveda*

Ayurveda is one of the world's oldest holistic systems of medicine, founded on the principle of maintaining health before treating disease. According to *Ayurvedic* philosophy, life (*Ayu*) is a coordinated union of *Śarīra* (body), *Indriya* (sense organs), *Satva* (mind), and *Atma* (soul)¹. Health is achieved when *Doṣa*, *Dhatu* and *Mala*, remain in equilibrium and when the mind, senses, and soul function harmoniously². This equilibrium can only be maintained when the body continuously receives the essential life-

supporting factors required for sustaining *Prāṇa*.

The word *Prāṇa* occupies a central position in *Ayurvedic* literature. Although commonly translated as "life force" or "vital energy," its meaning extends far beyond respiration. *Prāṇa* represents the dynamic principle responsible for every living function, including respiration, circulation, digestion, metabolism, tissue nourishment, sensory perception, neurological activity, and consciousness. It is considered indispensable for survival because all physiological activities depend upon its uninterrupted functioning.

Among all external factors required for sustaining life, *Anna* (food), *Jala* (water), and *Vāyu* (air) are regarded as the most fundamental. These three natural resources are universally required by every living organism irrespective of age, sex, geographical location, or species. Ayurveda considers them indispensable because they continuously nourish, support, and preserve *Prāṇa* throughout life.

***Anna* (Food): The Primary Source of Nourishment and Vitality**

Importance of Anna in Sustaining Prāṇa

Prāṇāḥ prāṇabhṛtām annam, annam loko'bhidhāvati / Varṇa-prasāda-sau-svarya-jīvita-pratibhā-sukham //

Tuṣṭiḥ puṣṭir balaṃ medhā sarvam annena pratiṣṭhitam / Laukikaṃ karma yad vṛttaṃ svargatoyaṃ ca vaidikam / Karma-apavargyaṃ ca yat tat cāpy annena pratiṣṭhitam //

Acharya Charak stated that food is the very essence of life for all living beings. Every living creature depends on food for survival and actively seeks it. A healthy complexion, clarity of the senses, a melodious voice, longevity, intelligence, happiness, proper nourishment, and physical strength are all sustained by wholesome food. Food also promotes contentment, vitality, and mental well-being. Furthermore, all worldly activities, the performance of Vedic rituals that lead to heavenly attainment, and even actions that ultimately contribute to liberation (*Moksha*) are fundamentally dependent upon food³.

Anna as the Foundation of Dhātu Nourishment and Ojas

Anna forms the foundation of physical nourishment. Properly digested food produces *Ahāra Rasa*, which nourishes all seven *Dhātus* (*Dhātavo hi dhātvāhārāḥ prakṛtim anuvartante*⁴) in sequence and ultimately contributes to the formation of *Ojas*, the essence responsible for strength, immunity, vitality, and longevity. Thus, wholesome food is considered one of the primary determinants of health, while improper dietary habits initiate the pathogenesis of numerous disorders.

Anna as the Best Sustainer of Life

Annam Vrittikaranam Shreshtham⁵

According to *Acharya Charaka*, *Anna* (food) is the best source of nourishment and sustains life by providing energy, promoting growth, and maintaining body tissues.

Jala (Water): The Essential Medium for Sustaining Life

Jala as the Essence of Life

***Pānīyaṁ prāṇināṁ prāṇaḥ viśvam eva
ca tanmayam / Ato'tyanta-niṣedhe'pi
na kaścid vāri vārayet //***

***Āśrayo bāṣpa-sādādhā mṛtyavo tad-
vilomataḥ / Na hi toyād vinā vṛttir
vyādhitasya ca //***

Acharya Vagabhatta emphasize the supreme importance of water (*Jala*) in sustaining life. According to *Ayurveda*, water is not merely a substance used to quench thirst but is regarded as the very *Prāṇa* (life force) of all living beings. Every physiological process, including digestion, circulation, metabolism, excretion, and temperature regulation, depends on the adequate availability of water. Therefore, the entire world, including humans, animals, plants, and all other living organisms, is sustained by water. Without it, life cannot exist⁶.

Importance of Water in Health and Disease

The verses further state that even when various food items are restricted during the treatment of diseases, water should never be completely prohibited, because total deprivation of water can be life-threatening. Inadequate water intake leads to dryness of the mouth, excessive thirst, weakness, impaired bodily functions, and severe dehydration, which may ultimately result in death. Thus, water is considered indispensable for maintaining the continuity of life.

Ayurveda also highlights that the necessity of water is not limited to healthy individuals alone. A diseased person requires water even more because it supports digestion, facilitates the transportation of nutrients and medicines,

maintains body fluids, helps eliminate metabolic waste, and promotes recovery⁶.

***Jala* as the Best Refreshing and Life-Supporting Substance**

Udakam Ashvasakaranam Shreshtham

Udaka (water) is the best refreshing and life-supporting substance, as it quenches thirst, maintains hydration, regulates body temperature, and provides an immediate feeling of comfort and vitality⁷.

Hence, these verses convey the fundamental *Ayurvedic* principle that water is the essence of life and should never be completely withheld. Proper intake of water is essential for preserving health, preventing dehydration, supporting recovery from illness, and ensuring the normal functioning of every organ system.

Modern Physiological Importance of Water

According to modern medical physiology, body is formed by solids and fluids. Fluid part is more than two third of the whole body. Water forms most of the fluid part of the body.

In human beings, the total body water varies from 45% to 75% of body weight. In a normal young adult male, body contains 60% to 65% of water and 35% to 40% of solids. In a normal young adult female, the water is 50% to 55% and solids are 45% to 50%. In females, water is less because of more amount of subcutaneous adipose tissue. In thin persons, water content is more than that in obese persons. In old age, water content is decreased due to increase in adipose tissue. Total quantity of body water in an average

human being weighing about 70 kg is about 40 L⁸.

Vāyu (Air): The Controller of Life and Physiological Functions

Vāyu as the Giver of Life and Consciousness

Vayuḥ Praṇa-Samjn-Pradana-Hetunam Sreṣṭhaḥ

Fresh air (Vāyu) is the foremost factor for restoring life, consciousness, and vital functions. It sustains respiration, revives awareness, and is essential for the maintenance of Prāṇa (life force)⁹.

Vayur ayur balaṁ vayur vayur dhata saririṇam /

Vayur visvam idaṁ sarvaṁ prabhur vayuś ca kirtitaḥ ||

Vāyu is life (Āyu), the source of strength (Bala), and the sustainer of all living beings. It governs every physiological activity of the body and pervades the entire universe; therefore, Vāyu is revered as the supreme regulator of life¹⁰.

Vāyu as the Master Regulator of Physiological Functions

According to Ayurveda, Vāyu is the master controller of all bodily and mental functions. It regulates respiration, circulation, nerve impulses, movement, speech, sensory and motor activities, digestion, excretion, and higher mental functions. Since Pitta and Kapha function under the influence of Vāyu, its equilibrium is essential for maintaining health, vitality, and normal physiological functions¹¹.

Vāyu and Longevity

Avyahata-gatir yasya sthanasthaḥ prakṛtau sthitaḥ /

Vayuḥ syat sodhikaṁ jived vita-rogaḥ samaḥ śatam //

When Vāyu remains in its natural state, resides in its proper location, and moves freely without obstruction, it maintains physiological balance, keeps the individual free from disease, and supports a healthy lifespan of one hundred years¹².

Vāyu represents both the external atmospheric air essential for respiration and the internal physiological principle governing all movements within the body. Through Prāṇa Vāta, it regulates breathing, swallowing, circulation, speech, perception, cardiac function, and neurological coordination. Without the continuous supply of clean air, life cannot be sustained even for a short duration.

Yogavāhī Nature of Vāyu

Yogavahaḥ paraṁ vayuḥ saṁyogad ubhayarthakṛt /

Dahakṛt tejasa yuktaḥ, sitakṛt somasaṁśrayat //

Vāta Doṣa is described as Yogavāhī, meaning it possesses the unique ability to acquire and enhance the qualities of substances or doṣas with which it associates. Owing to this exceptional property, Vāta can produce opposite effects depending on its association. When combined with Tejas (Pitta), it intensifies heat and produces burning sensations (Dāha). Conversely, when associated with Soma (Kapha), it enhances cooling properties and produces a cooling effect (Śīta). Thus, Vāta acts as a dynamic

carrier that amplifies the functional attributes of the doṣa or substance accompanying it¹³.

Correlation with Modern Biomedical Science

Although these concepts were described thousands of years ago using Ayurvedic terminology, modern biomedical science similarly recognizes nutrition, hydration, and oxygen as the three fundamental requirements for maintaining cellular metabolism and physiological homeostasis. Adequate nutrition provides energy and structural components, water acts as the universal biological solvent, and oxygen enables aerobic metabolism and ATP production. These similarities highlight the remarkable scientific relevance of Ayurvedic concepts in the contemporary understanding of health.

Discussion

Ayurveda recognizes *Anna*, *Jala*, and *Vāyu* as the three fundamental life-sustaining elements responsible for preserving *Prāṇa*, the vital force governing all physiological functions. The classical references reviewed in this article collectively emphasize that health depends upon the proper nourishment, hydration, and regulation of physiological activities through these three natural elements.

Anna is described as the primary source of nourishment that sustains life, promotes strength, intellect, longevity, and supports the sequential nourishment of the *Sapta Dhātus* leading to the formation of *Ojas*. Proper dietary intake therefore plays a central role in maintaining health, whereas inappropriate diet contributes to disease development.

Jala is regarded as the very essence of life and is indispensable for digestion, circulation, metabolism, thermoregulation, and elimination of waste products. Classical *Ayurvedic* texts advise that water should never be completely withheld, even during illness, highlighting its essential role in maintaining physiological balance and supporting recovery.

Vāyu occupies a unique position as both the external air required for respiration and the internal biological force governing all movements within the body. It regulates respiration, circulation, neurological functions, and the activities of other *Doṣas*. The concepts of balanced *Vāyu*, its role in longevity, and its *Yogavāhī* nature demonstrate its importance in maintaining physiological equilibrium.

These *Ayurvedic* principles closely correspond with modern biomedical concepts, where nutrition, hydration, and oxygen are recognized as the three fundamental requirements for cellular metabolism, homeostasis, and survival. In the present era of unhealthy dietary habits, inadequate hydration, air pollution, and lifestyle disorders, these classical concepts remain highly relevant for preventive healthcare and holistic well-being.

Conclusion

Ayurveda identifies *Anna*, *Jala*, and *Vāyu* as the three indispensable life-sustaining elements responsible for preserving *Prāṇa* and maintaining health. Wholesome food nourishes the body and supports the formation of *Ojas*, water maintains physiological homeostasis, and *Vāyu* regulates all vital bodily functions. The

remarkable correlation between these classical concepts and modern biomedical science highlights their continuing scientific relevance. Adopting healthy dietary practices, adequate hydration, and access to clean air should therefore be regarded as fundamental measures for promoting health, preventing disease, and achieving holistic well-being.

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