

Earth, Wind and Fire

You've heard the word *dosha* before—but knowing your *prakriti* can help you stay balanced and healthy.

By Niika Q. DeVivo

Lately it seems as if the phrase "my dosha" is tossed around like an old shoe. We've all gotten pretty comfortable using *dosha* to indicate a person's Ayurvedic body type. But do we really understand what the word means?

The three doshas—*vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*—are principles. They can't be seen with the naked eye, but their effects in the body can't be missed. Thought to be condensed from different combinations of the primal elements earth, water, fire, air, and ether, the doshas are the life energies behind all of our bodily functions. Each of them commands a specific force in the body, and each is associated with certain sensory qualities.

Dosha is a Sanskrit word that means "fault," "defect," or "that which darkens." It comes from the root *dush*, meaning "to become corrupt or bad; to sin." A classical text of Ayurveda, the Charaka Samhita, employs it mainly to indicate excess that is capable of causing disease.

"Why all the negativity?" you might ask. While the doshas are certainly essential to our very existence, if one or more of them increase beyond what is normal for our particular makeup, presto! We're out of balance.

But if *dosha* isn't exactly the word we should use to indicate Ayurvedic constitution, what is? *Prakriti* means "nature," and it refers not only to the natural universe but also to a person's nature—to that distinct constellation of qualities native to an individual. Ayurveda theorizes that each of us possesses, from conception, a unique percentage of *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. Our *prakriti* is our own permanent biological blueprint, a snapshot of our combined doshas at our first moment of existence. Our *prakriti* is the template for our original, and therefore personally ideal, state of balance.

While a rare soul may be born with the perfect tridoshic proportions (33 1/3 percent of each dosha), most of us have a *prakriti* that's dominated by one or two. We can say someone has a *vata prakriti* if his or her constitution is mostly *vata*. Or that someone with a *prakriti* that's, say, 50 percent *pitta*, 40 percent *vata*, and 10 percent *kapha* is a *pitta-vata*. (An Ayurvedic practitioner can help you determine your *prakriti*.)

Whatever your *prakriti*, though, the influence of the doshas fluctuates, affected by any stimulus that engages our senses. As the Charaka Samhita states, "The attributes of the doshas resemble those of the factors that vitiate [aggravate] them." When the qualities of our sensory experience cause any of the doshas to accumulate in us, the result is our *vikriti*, which means our "current state" or "manifest imbalance." Doshic imbalance can lead to a myriad of diseases, the seriousness of which is determined by which doshas are in excess, which bodily tissues are affected, and for how long they're affected.

So keep an eye on your *vikriti*! And don't hesitate to see a qualified practitioner for dietary, herbal, and lifestyle guidance.