

Fire – The Transformational Energy of Life

By Satyanarayana Dasa

Agnimile purohitam yagyasya devamrtvijam hotaram ratnadhatamam

"O Agni, I adore Thee, O priest, O divine minister,

Who officiates at the divine Sacrifice,

Who is also the invoker, the Summoner,

Who most bestows the divine wealth upon us."

This opening verse of the Rig Veda clearly outlines the significance of Agni or Fire, in our Vedic culture. According to Hindu scriptures, Agni is the first of the cosmic gods to be invoked and worshipped. Agni means "fire," and this fire refers to the aspiring flame that rises from our innermost being. Agni is the mouth of God and oblations are poured into the fire in order to worship God and the *devas*. Mouth is called "*mukha*" in Sanskrit and from *mukha* comes the word "*mukhya*," which means chief. As the *mukha*, Agni is the prominent *deva*.

In Ayurveda, fire is represented by Pitta, one of the three bodily humors. Pitta is hot, sharp, penetrating, oily, liquid, light, sour and pungent in nature, and controls the functions of digestion, metabolism and energy production in the body. When Agni is low in one's body one has weak digestion, leading to various diseases. Whatever the disease may be, except for *bhasmaka* [caused due to the hyper-functioning of the digestive capacity], if Agni can be improved one will regain health. Most of the Ayurvedic treatments try to improve the Agni of the patient. Good health is the basis of spiritual life; a sound mind exists within a sound body. Therefore, a spiritual practitioner must learn to keep his or her Pitta in balance.

Pitta predominant people have a high metabolic rate and their body temperature is usually slightly higher than normal. They have a good physical and mental appetite and are capable of comprehending things as fast as they can digest their food. In essence, they have a great appetite for learning and understanding.

According to Vedic cosmology, the world is made of five elements – air, water, fire, earth and space. Out of these elements, the fire element is responsible for transforming things from one form to another. All transformations in the universe occur because of fire – the process of cooking, which uses heat, transforms raw food into a soft digestible form; fruits ripen because of heat from photosynthesis, and so on.

Impact of Fire on Spiritual Health

Pitta is illuminating in nature and moves in an upward direction. Even though Vata, or Air, is also light and mobile, it moves haphazardly; whereas fire only moves upward, indicating the Pitta's hunger for moving toward higher goals. In essence, energetic Pittas are naturally inclined to transform or change things for the better.

According to ancient seers, spiritual advancement is the biggest change that can happen in an individual's life. The process of liberating oneself from material attachment, or spirituality, is by far the best use of the Pitta nature in humans. This is why Vedic culture attributes tremendous importance to fire and propagates its worship during every ritual.

We get preceptorial information from our senses all the time. The mind receives messages through the senses, and information needs to be digested. Just as ingested food is digested in the stomach and intestines, mental food is digested by the *buddhi* or intellect, which is Pitta or fire predominant. Because of their strong digestive capacity, Pitta people are able to digest this knowledge in vast amounts. But, when their pitta is imbalanced or weak, the mind is not able to completely digest all the information coming into it, leading to the creation of mental *ama*. Hence, people with a weak Pitta become prone to mental problems and psychological disorders such as phobia and depression, etc.

According to Ayurveda, an unhealthy body and mind is unfit for spiritual practice. Therefore, having a balanced Pitta becomes a critical factor for spiritual health. When in a balanced state, one can concentrate and comprehend things properly. But if the Pitta is disturbed, a person has difficulty focusing the mind, and difficulty with concentration and comprehension, which are compulsory requirements for spiritual advancement. Moreover, when Pitta is increased a person becomes impatient and demands immediate results. This leads to irritability, anger, envy and jealousy. Such symptoms are common among youth because they indulge in pitta-aggravating diets. Imbalanced Pitta leads to preoccupation with judgement and revenge. This becomes a barrier in good human relations; thus balanced Pitta is crucial to one's spiritual advancement.

Spiritual Guidelines for Pitta

Listed here are few guidelines that will help you maintain a balance in Pitta and prepare your body for spiritual practice:

- Every spiritual path requires one to follow a specific lifestyle, but one has to make sure that this does not disturb one's Pitta. For example, in Bhakti Yoga a practitioner is expected to fast on certain days, such as Ekadashi, Janmashtami and other religious days. However, complete fasting might not be a good option for Pitta type persons as fasting for long hours can lead to hyperacidity, indigestion, ulcers and headache, ultimately becoming an obstacle to their spiritual life. So, it is better to avoid complete fasting; instead, Pittas should take fruits, milk and other light foods on days of fasting. After all, the purpose of fasting is not to starve oneself, but to utilize and re-direct the energy that one typically uses for digesting food to remember God. In Sanskrit, fast is called "*upa-vasa*," which literally means to live close (to God through remembrance).
- People who have high Pitta also have a tendency to become very angry and controlling. They must learn to balance the pitta with proper diet, breathing exercises

and meditation. Even though they love knowledge and wisdom, Pittas might have the tendency to take revenge if incited – a quality which is not good for spiritual life. Hence, Pitta people must cultivate the habit of forgiveness; they need to realize that Vata and Kapha people have different capabilities and might not be able to live up to their expectations all the time. If not controlled, Pitta's aggressive nature can often lead to health problems such as hypertension, stress and anxiety.

- Because he has energy and is intelligent, Pitta likes to move and change things. Hence, he should first find an appropriate spiritual practice. For example, such a person should not sit down to meditate for long periods – he will not be successful at it. Pitta type people need more physical action. *Asana* and *pranayama* can be good for Pitta people, as they need to engage in something that involves bodily movement and thus utilizes their immense energy levels.
- Pitta type people also should avoid being in the sun for prolonged periods of time.