

## An Ayurvedic Review of Agni and Its Impact on human health

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### ABSTRACT

*Ayurveda* has described an important factor of digestion and metabolism in our body as *Agni*. Ingested food is to be digested, absorbed and assimilated, which is unavoidable for the maintenance of life and is performed by *agni* in *Ayurveda*. The term *agni* is used in the sense of digestion of food and metabolic products. *Agni* converts food in the form of energy, which is responsible for all vital function of the body. About the importance of *Agni*, *Acharya Charaka* has mentioned that after stoppage of the function of *Agni*, the individual dies and when the *agni* of an individual in *sama avastha*, then person would be absolutely healthy and would lead a long, happy and enjoying healthy life. But, if the *agni* of a person is vitiated, the whole metabolism in his body would be disturbed and resulting in ill health and produces the diseases in body. Hence, *Agni* is said to be the base (*mool*) of life.

### 1. Introduction

In *Shabdakalpadruma*, 61 synonyms of *Agni* have been compiled. These synonyms help in explaining the nature and function of the *Agni*. e.g. *Vaishvanara*, *Sarva paka*, *Tanoonpata*, *Amivachatana*, *Damunasa*, *Shuchi*, *Vishwambhar*, *Rudra* etc.<sup>1</sup>

**Nyaya & Vaisesika Darshana** divided *Agni* into following categories-

**Bhuma** or the physical fire,

**Divya** or the celestial fire like the lightning, rays of sun, moon, and the stars,

**Audarya** or the abdominal fire which is responsible for the digestion as well as metabolism and,

**Akaraja** which is present in the metals such as gold and silver.

Solar energy is the source of any sort of conversion in the living beings. *Agni* represents this solar energy in the living beings. *Agni* has the capacity to convert the substance in any form because of its occult power. Maintenance of physiological actions in a state dependent on the normal state of *Agni* while the abnormal state of *Agni* contributes to pathological changes and absence of *Agni* results in death of the living being. *Ayurveda* has described an important factor of digestion and metabolism in our body as *Agni*. In *Ayurveda*, the term "*Agni*" is used in the sense of digestion of food and metabolic products.

"*Shantauagnaumreeyateyuktechiramjeevatyanamayaha..*"

Destruction of *agni* leads to death of the person. If *agni* maintained in *samyavastha*, that person will have long life span without affliction of diseases.<sup>2</sup> One of the factors mentioned by *Acharya Sushruta* in the definition of *Swastha Purusha* is "*Samagni*" showing the importance of *samyavastha* of *agni* for *swasthyata*.

*Ayurveda* system has unique explanation regarding *Purusha* and *Prakruti* which are dependent on each other and is justified by the concepts like *Panchmahabhuta Siddhanta*,

*Lok purusha -samyavada*, *Chaturvimshatika purusha* etc. Keeping this in view it is considered that *Purusha* is made up of *Panchmahabhuta* in which *Agni Mahabhuta* is one and is responsible for all the activities of life. The one who present or reside in between *pakvashaya* and *amashaya* having *panchmahabhuta* formed with *tejas guna* doing the *paka karma* and *tyaktadravata karma* etc is called *agni*<sup>3</sup>. *Agni Mahabhuta* present in *sharira* in the form of *jatharagni* which is responsible for *Ayu*, *Varna*, *Bala*, *Swasthya*, *Utsaha*, *Upachaya*, *Prabha* and hence considered as *Oja* and *prana* of *deha*<sup>4</sup>.

*Agni* is said to be the reason for existence and it is compared to god.<sup>5</sup> *Agni* is one among the vital substance of living beings this shows the high importance of *agni* in the body. It brings the transformation of the *ahara* and helps in the formation *Rasadi saptadhatu*, *Upadhatus* and *Malas*. Any alteration in the function of *agni* will lead to malabsorption and causing disturbance in the normal function of the body. The *samyata* of all these is brought about by the *samagni* and *purush* will be called as *swastha*. If this *agni* in the body subsides it causes *vikruti* and may also lead to the death of a person. It is mainly divided into 3 categories viz., *Jatharagni*, *Dhatvagni* and *Bhutagni*.

Types of *Agnis* describes in various classical *Ayurvedic* texts, as shown below:

- *Acharya Charaka* has described about 13 *Agnis*<sup>6</sup> - *Jatharagni-1*, *Bhatagni-5*, *Dhatvagni-7*
- According to *Acharya Sushruta*, described five types of *pitta*<sup>7</sup> - *Pachakagni*, *Ranjakagni*, *Alochakagni*, *Sadhakagni* and *Bhrajakagni*
- *Acharya Vagbhata* has described different types of *Agni* - *Bhutagni-5*, *Dhatvagni-7*, *Doshagni-3* and *Malagni-3*
- *Acharya Sharangadhara* has described 5 types *pitta*<sup>8</sup> - *Pachak*, *Bhrajak*, *Ranjak*, *Alochaka* and *Sadhak*
- *Acharya Bhavamishra* has followed *Acharya Charaka* and *Acharya vagbhata*<sup>9</sup>.
- *Agni* has been divided into 13 types according to the

function and site of action. These are:

1. *Jatharagni*- One *Agni* present in the stomach and duodenum
2. *Bhutagni*- Five *Agni* from five basic elements
3. *Dhatvagni*- Seven *Agni* present, one in each of the seven *dhatu*s.

According, they are classified into three groups, namely *Jatharagni*, *Bhutagni* and *Dhatvagni*.

### **Jatharagni**

*Jatharagni* is the *Agni* or bioenergy present in the *Jathara* (stomach and Duodenum). *Grahani* is the site of *Agni*. This is mainly responsible for the digestion of the ingested food. In the opinion of *Dhanvantari*, it is the *Kala* known as “*Pittadhara*”; *kala* responsible for the production of *pitta*, situated at the entrance of the *Pakvashaya* (intestine) and acting as a bolt to the door of the pathway/channel of food. It is responsible for the duration of life, health, colour, *ojas* (essence of the *Dhatu*s), strength of all the *Bhutagni* and *Dhatvagni*. The strength of the *Grahani* is from *Agni* itself, and the strength of *Agni* is from *Grahani*. When the *Agni* undergoes vitiation, *Grahani* also gets vitiated and produces diseases.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, *Jatharagni* depicts the physiological components of digestion and metabolism which takes place in the stomach and intestines. *Jatharagni* is considered to be the most important because each and every nutrient that one ingests first comes to the *Jathara* and is subjected to the action of *Jatharagni*. *Jatharagni* digests the food materials that consist of the *panchmahabhuta* and transforms it for utilization by the respective *Dhatu paramanus* (tissues).

*Jatharagni* is also responsible for separation of the *Ahara rasa* into the *Prasad bhag* and *Kitta bhag* in our body<sup>11</sup>. All the *Dhatvagni* depend on the normal, healthy state of *Jatharagni*. If the *Jatharagni* is *Tikshna* or *Manda*, it will cause an excessive or retarded action of the *Dhatvagni*. This disturbed action ultimately leads to various disorders. *Jatharagni* controls the function of all other 12 *Agnis*. All the *Agnis* are totally dependent on the status of *Jatharagni*.<sup>12</sup>

*Jatharagni* is also classified into 4 categories according to its performance of digestion in the human being<sup>13</sup>. Namely *Vishamagni*, *Tikshanagni*, *Mandagni* and *Samagni*.

### **1. Vishamagni**

This type of *Agni* changes between digesting food quickly and slowly. When this *Agni* is affected by the *Vata Dosha*, it leads to different types of *udargata roga*. *Vata* induced irregularity has features such as *Adhmana* (flatulence), *Shoola* (colic), *Udavarta*, *Atisara* (diarrhea), *Jathara gaurava* (abdominal heaviness) and *Antrakunjana* (borborygmi) and *Pravahana* (extra effort for defecation), sometime it digests slowly, sometimes normally and sometime produces symptoms such as above.<sup>14</sup>

### **2. Tikshanagni**

*Tikshnagni* is a state, where *ahara* digest very quickly, regardless of the type of food. *Acharya Sushruta* states that when the power of digestion is increased from normal to above normal, food digests very fast and produces *Kshudha*. When food is digested, the throat, the mouth cavity and the lips become dry with a burning sensation, *Santapa* (burning

sensation in whole body) and *Daha* (local burning sensation). This condition is known as “*Bhasmak Roga*” according to *Ayurveda*.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Mandagni**

“*Mand*” means slow. The meaning of the *Mandagni* is slow digestive power or digestive capacity. Those who are having *Mandagni* eat very little and are unable to digest even a small amount of *Ahara*. *Udarashirogaurava* (heaviness of abdomen and head), *Shwasa* (shortness of breath), *Kasa* (cough), *Praseka* (salivation) and *Chhardi* (vomiting), *Gatrasada* (weakness of the body).<sup>16</sup>

### **4. Samagni**

The *Samagni* digests and assimilates food properly within proper time. This thus increases the quality of the *Dhatu*s. Individuals having *Samagni* are always healthy. Due to *Tridosha* balance whatever the person eats *Agni* digests the food if it is consumed in proper quantity and at proper time, with rules regulations of taking food.<sup>17</sup>

### **Bhutagni**

*Bhutagni* is the one that is present in a basic element (*Bhutas*). Each *Bhuta* or element of nature making up our body composition is said to have a fire of its own. These fires take the essential parts of the nutrition and metabolize them so as to support selves. There are five *Agnis* in each of the five basic elements, namely.

1. *Prithvi or Parthiva Agni* (fire within the Earth element)
2. *Apya Agni* (fire within the water element)
3. *Tajasa or Agneya Agni* (fire within the fire element)
4. *Vayaveeya Agni* (fire element within the wind or air element)
5. *Akasheeya / Naabhasa Agni* (fire within the space or Ether element)

Each and Every cell in our body is composed of the five *Mahabhuta* or five basic elements. Naturally, each cell (*Dhatu paramanu*) consists of these five *Bhutagni* also. All the nutrients in this world that we eat also consist of the same five basic elements with their respective *Agni* or bioenergies. Thus, they are completely similar with respect to the five basic elements with their *Bhutagni* in our body cells as well in all the outside nutrient that we ingest for the nutrition of our body. *Acharya Charaka* has mentioned that the five *Bhutagni* digest their own part of the element present in the food materials. After the digestion of food by the *Bhutagni*, digested materials containing the elements and qualities similar to each *bhutas* nourish their own specific *bhutika* elements of the body<sup>18</sup>.

The *Ahara* which we take comprises of the *Panchmahabhuta* of nature which compensate their counterparts in the body. Example: The *parthiva amsha* (Earth part or solid part of the food) of the *Ahara* first gets digested by the *Jatharagni*. When this digested food reaches the tissues, it further gets digested by the *parthivagni*. After this *Parthiva amsha* of the food nourishes the *Parthiva Guna*'s of those *Dhatu*s, *Srotas* and the whole body. The same process takes place with *Apya amsha*, *tejasa amsha*, *vayavya amsha* and *Nabhasa amsha* of the food. Firstly, they are digested by the *Jatharagni*. Later their minute parts reach the tissues as per respective *Bhutagnis*.

These *Bhutagni* act after the *Jatharagni* present in the stomach and duodenum, acting on the food and causing their disintegration. In the modern physiology perspective, the action of *Jatharagni* can be equated with the digestion in the stomach and duodenum, and the action of the *Bhutagni* can be equated with the conversion of digested materials in the liver.

### Dhatvagni

*Dhatvagni* means the fire which is located inside the tissue. All the seven *Dhatus* (seven element tissues of the body) contain their own *Agni* to metabolize the nutrient materials supplied to them through their own *Srotas*.

1. *Rasagni* present in the *Rasa Dhatu*.
2. *Raktagni* present in the *Rakta Dhatu*.
3. *Mamsagni* present in the *Mamsa Dhatu*.
4. *Medagni* present in the *Meda Dhatu*.
5. *Asthyagni* present in the *Asthi Dhatu*.
6. *Majjagni* present in the *Majja Dhatu*.
7. *Shukragni* present in the *Shukra Dhatu*.

The components thus formed after the action of *Dhatvagni* on the food (in circulation) help in the formation of the same tissue, nourishes the next tissue in sequence, produce energy and tissue toxins or waste components which are meant to be expelled.

Each *Dhatvagni* in each *Dhatu* synthesizes and transforms the essential *Rasa Dhatu* required for that particular *Dhatu* or cell from the basic nutrients present in the *Anna Rasa* or essence of the diet that we consume. Each *Dhatvagni* has got a specially to synthesize and transform the constituents suitable to its particular *Dhatu*. This action is a sort of selective action. *Acharya Charaka* has mentioned the fact that the seven *Dhatus* that are a support of the body contain their own *Agni*, and by their own *Agni* they digest and transform the materials supplied to them to make the substances alike to them for assimilation and nourishment.<sup>19</sup>

### Agni Samyata and Agni Vaisamyata

Existence of all the different kinds of *agni* in their required *Pramana*, *Gunas* and *Karma* is known as *Agni Samya*. While

*Vruddhi* and *Kshaya* in these aspects is known as *Agni Vaishamyata*. *Vruddhi* and *Kshaya* are known as *Tikshana* and *Manda* respectively. Both these are abnormal and gives rise to many diseases in the body.

### Effect of Agni Vaishamyata

When the three kinds of abnormal *agni* stated above are present in *sharira*, digestion of food will not be proper. In *Mandagni*, the food will be *apaka*, in case of *Tikshanagni* it will be *Dagdhapaka* and in case of *Vishamagni* it will be *Pakwa-Apakwa* and also different from one period of digestion to the other<sup>20</sup>. In all these conditions there will be accumulation of *Ama* in the *Rasa Dhatu*.

### 2. Conclusion

*Acharya Charaka* has mentioned that various types of dietic materials are digested by their own *Bhutagni*, encouraged and enhanced by *Antaragni* (*Jatharagni*), which is further digested and metabolized by *Dhatvagni* to associate the body with the nutritional strength, complexion and happy life along with providing energy to the seven *dhatus*. When the *agni* is in a normal condition it supports life unconditionally. When this *agni* gets morbid or contaminated it becomes a cause for many diseases. It is also said that all the diseases have their origin in the morbid *agni* i.e., a disturbed *agni* is the chief culprit in the causation of all psychosomatic diseases. We know that the morbid *doshas* cause diseases by attacking and disturbing the normalcy of body's tissues which are the mainstays of defense, immunity and maintenance of health. The morbidity of these *doshas* in the form of pathological increase or decrease always depends on the status of *agni*. If the *agni* is functioning normally, the *doshas* also remain in an undisturbed form and support our body, mind and life. On the contrary if the *agni* gets disturbed, the *doshas* too will get disturbed and cause many diseases. Hence understanding of *agni* in one of the important concepts for the understanding of disease process as well as to prescribed principles of treatment.

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