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The Five-Element Theory in Sowa-Rigpa: An Integrated Perspective on Human Physiology, Pathology, and Pharmacology

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Abstract

The Five-Element Theory ('Byung-ba lnga) is a fundamental concept in Sowa-Rigpa that explains the interconnected nature of the human body, disease, and medicinal substances. This article briefly examines the roles of the five elements—Earth (Sa), Water (Chu), Fire (Me), Wind (rLung), and Space (Nam-mkha)—in human physiology, pathology, and therapeutic understanding. Drawing upon classical Sowa-Rigpa texts, particularly the Gyud-Zhi, it explores their contributions to bodily formation, structural and functional activities, seasonal variations, internal organs, and the process of dying. It also highlights the clinical significance of elemental relationships in pulse diagnosis and the maintenance of physiological balance. Understanding these elemental principles provides an essential theoretical foundation for disease prevention, diagnosis, and treatment within the Sowa-Rigpa medical system.

Keywords: Sowa-Rigpa; Five Elements; Human Physiology; Pathology; Seasonal Variation; Pulse Diagnosis; Medicinal Theory.

Introduction

Sowa-Rigpa, traditionally known as the science of healing, is one of the five major branches of knowledge in Buddhism. It represents a comprehensive and distinctive system of traditional medicine that encompasses the understanding of human health, disease prevention, diagnosis, and therapeutic management. Its primary objective is to maintain and restore the health of individuals by addressing various disorders affecting the human body and mind, thereby promoting longevity, well-being, and a healthy life.

With a documented historical tradition extending over more than two thousand years, Sowa-Rigpa has evolved through the accumulated knowledge, observations, and practical experiences of successive generations of traditional physicians and scholars. Our ancestors developed a comprehensive body of medical knowledge through their continuous efforts to understand and manage various diseases arising in the natural environment. This knowledge was shaped by the geographical, climatic, ecological, and cultural conditions of different regions and was systematically preserved and transmitted through classical medical texts and established clinical practices.

Within the theoretical and practical framework of Sowa-Rigpa, an understanding of the Five Elements (*'Byung-ba lnga*) and their relationship with the three fundamental factors—body, disease, and medicine—is of particular importance. These principles provide a fundamental basis for understanding the formation and functioning of the human body, the origin and development of diseases, and the therapeutic properties

of medicinal substances. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the elemental composition and interrelationship of these three factors is essential for physicians and practitioners of Sowa-Rigpa in the effective assessment and management of diseases.

The present discussion briefly examines this subject under three principal sections: (i) the fundamental characteristics and nature of the Five Elements; (ii) their relationship with the human body and its physiological constitution; and (iii) their relationship with medicinal substances and their therapeutic applications.

Fundamental Concept of the Relationship Between Body, Disease, and Medicine

The classical Sowa-Rigpa medical text, *Gyud-Zhi* (Four Tantras), explains the fundamental relationship between the human body, disease, and medicinal substances through the following principle:

"The human body is constituted by the five elements; diseases affecting the body also arise from the five elements; and medicinal substances employed as remedies likewise possess the essential nature of the five elements. Thus, the body, disease, and medicine are interconnected through their common elemental nature. The relationship between harmful factors and the factors that produce harm is one of mutual dependence, characterised by the relationship between a supporting basis and that which depends upon it. Similarly, the relationship between the body requiring treatment and the therapeutic means employed for its treatment is associated with the effects of merit and karma."

This classical explanation highlights the fundamental interconnectedness of the human body, disease processes, and medicinal substances within the Sowa-Rigpa medical framework. It establishes the elemental basis through which the origin of disease and the principles of therapeutic intervention can be understood.

Characteristics and Definitions of the Five Elements

The term *'Byung-ba* (elements) refers to the fundamental constituents upon which various phenomena depend for their origin and manifestation. In this context, the term denotes the collective concept of the five elements: Earth (*Sa*), Water (*Chu*), Fire (*Me*), Wind (*rLung*), and Space (*Nam-mkha*). These elements are regarded as the fundamental causes or constituents underlying the formation of various phenomena.

According to *The Mirror That Clearly Reveals the Meaning of Certain Sowa-Rigpa Medical Terms* by Taktsang Lotsawa, it is explained that:

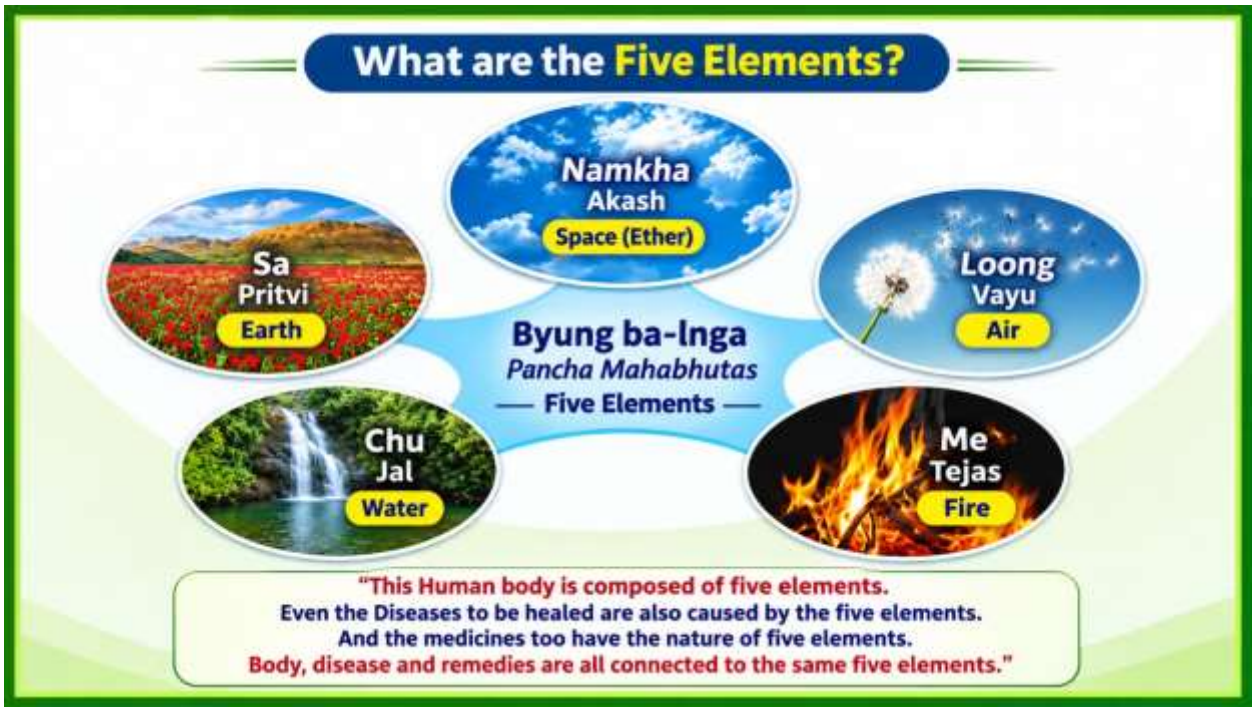
"All phenomena of the external environment and the internal living world, including both stationary and moving entities, are constituted through the five elements—Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, and Space. Since all these phenomena arise in dependence upon these elements, they are designated as the elements (*'Byung-ba*)."

Each of the five elements possesses its own distinct characteristics and defining properties. As explained in *The Key to Understanding the Principles of Knowledge* (*Rig-lam 'Khrul-gyi lDe-mig*), their respective characteristics are described as follows:

- **Earth (*Sa*):** Characterised by solidity, firmness, and hardness.
- **Water (*Chu*):** Characterised by moisture, fluidity, and wetness.
- **Fire (*Me*):** Characterised by heat and the capacity to burn.
- **Wind (*rLung*):** Characterised by lightness and mobility.
- **Space (*Nam-mkha*):** Characterised by the absence of obstruction, resistance, or physical contact.

These definitions establish the fundamental nature and distinguishing properties of the Five Elements within the Sowa-Rigpa medical framework. Accordingly, all material phenomena in the universe are understood to be constituted by the Five Elements, with their relative proportions and predominance varying according to the nature of each particular phenomenon.

Tibetan term	**Preferred English term**
'Byung-ba lnga	Five Elements
Sa	Earth
Chu	Water
Me	Fire
rLung	Wind
Nam-mkha	Space
sNod	Inanimate world / external environment
BCud	Living beings / animate world



Relationship Between the Five Elements and Human Physiology

As discussed earlier, all phenomena in the universe are constituted through the Five Elements. Similarly, the human body, which is considered one of the principal forms of sentient existence among the six realms of beings, is also formed through the combined contribution of these five elements. According to Sowa-Rigpa, the formation of the human body requires the presence of healthy reproductive constituents from both parents, namely, the paternal semen and maternal blood, together with the essential contributions of the Five Elements. The *Gyud-Zhi* explains this principle as follows:

"Without Earth, formation is impossible; without Water, cohesion cannot occur. Without Fire, maturation cannot take place; without Wind, growth and development cannot proceed. Without Space, there is no room for expansion."

This teaching emphasises that the formation of the human body depends upon the essential contribution of all five elements. It further illustrates a fundamental principle of nature: an effect cannot arise in the absence of its necessary causes.

The classical medical texts further explain the relationship between the Five Elements and the structural and functional components of the human body:

"Earth gives rise to flesh, bones, the nose, and the sense of smell. Water gives rise to blood, the tongue, taste, and moisture. Fire gives rise to bodily warmth, complexion, the eyes, and visual perception. Wind gives rise to respiration, the skin, and tactile sensation. Space gives rise to bodily cavities, the ears, and auditory perception."

Similarly, the *Eight Branches of Northern Medicine* (*Byang-pa'i Yan-lag brGyad-pa*) describes the elemental composition of the human body as follows:

"Whatever is solid and heavy in the body, including the bones, belongs predominantly to the Earth element. Blood, serous fluids, skin, and other moist and fluid components belong to the Water element. Digestive heat, bodily warmth, and the three processes of transformation are governed by the Fire element. Exhalation, inhalation, and movements in the upward and downward directions, together with the functions of propulsion and transportation, are governed by the Wind element. The empty spaces and cavities within the internal organs belong to the Space element."

These classical explanations clearly demonstrate that the Five Elements are indispensable constituents in the initial formation and subsequent development of the human body. Each element contributes distinct structural and physiological properties, thereby supporting the integrated functioning of the body.

Relationship Between the External Environment, Seasonal Changes, and Human Physiology

Throughout life, the external elements of the natural environment remain closely interconnected with the internal elements of the human body. Their interaction influences physiological functions, bodily strength, digestive capacity, and dietary requirements. This relationship can be understood through the seasonal variations occurring throughout the year, which are described in Sowa-Rigpa in terms of four or six seasonal divisions.

Human physical strength varies according to seasonal changes. It is generally considered stronger during the two winter periods, moderate during spring and autumn, and weaker during summer. These variations have important implications for dietary practices and daily activities.

Winter (Early Winter and Late Winter)

Winter is divided into early winter and late winter. The ninth and tenth lunar months are generally designated as early winter. During this period, the external environment becomes increasingly cold, and the cooling properties of the external elements cause the pores of the skin to contract. Consequently, internal bodily heat is retained rather than dissipated into the external environment. As a result, digestive heat becomes stronger, enabling food and beverages to be digested more rapidly.

During this period, inadequate food and fluid intake may lead to the depletion of bodily constituents, including blood and other essential tissues. Therefore, adequate consumption of nourishing foods is recommended. Among the six tastes, the first three tastes—sweet, sour, and salty—which are predominantly associated with the Earth, Water, and Fire elements, respectively, are particularly recommended. Foods and beverages possessing oily and nourishing properties should be consumed in sufficient quantities.

Appropriate lifestyle practices are also important. Wearing warm clothing, including woollen or fur garments, helps protect the body from external cold. Late winter, corresponding to the second winter period, is even colder than early winter. Therefore, greater attention should be given to maintaining bodily warmth and adequate nutritional intake during this period.

Spring

Spring corresponds to the first and second lunar months. During this period, increasing solar radiation gradually raises the temperature of the external environment. As the external temperature increases, the pores of the skin begin to open, allowing internal bodily heat to dissipate. Consequently, digestive heat becomes relatively weakened.

To support digestive heat during this season, Sowa-Rigpa recommends foods and beverages with warming properties. Among the six tastes, the last three tastes—pungent, bitter, and astringent—are recommended. These tastes are associated with the predominance of the elemental combinations described in the classical Sowa-Rigpa framework. Lifestyle practices should also include physical activities such as walking and other forms of appropriate exercise to support digestion and maintain physiological balance.

Early Summer

Early summer corresponds to the third and fourth lunar months. During this period, the intensity of sunlight and the heat of the external environment increase considerably. Excessive environmental heat may gradually diminish the strength and essential bodily constituents.

Therefore, foods and beverages predominantly possessing sweet taste and oily and cooling properties, which are associated particularly with the Earth and Water elements, are recommended. Regarding lifestyle, individuals are advised to remain in cool and well-ventilated places where a gentle breeze is available, thereby minimising the adverse effects of excessive environmental heat.

Summer (Rainy Season)

Summer corresponds to the fifth and sixth lunar months. During this period, clouds accumulate in the sky, sunlight becomes less intense, and rainfall occurs frequently. These environmental conditions produce a relatively cold and damp atmosphere, which may adversely affect bodily warmth and particularly weaken the digestive heat of the stomach.

Consequently, foods, beverages, and lifestyle practices that help generate and maintain digestive heat are recommended during this season. Particular attention should be given to preserving digestive function and preventing the accumulation of cold-related disorders.

Autumn

Autumn corresponds to the seventh and eighth lunar months. Generally, the sky becomes clear, and intense solar radiation increases environmental heat. Under these conditions, the external elemental influences may contribute to the aggravation of disorders associated with excessive heat, particularly those related to *mKhris-pa* (bile).

During this season, foods and beverages possessing sweet, bitter, and astringent tastes are recommended to help counteract excessive heat. Appropriate lifestyle practices include staying in cool and well-ventilated environments and wearing clothing suitable for maintaining a comfortable body temperature.

In summary, dietary and lifestyle practices should be adjusted according to seasonal variations. During summer and winter, foods and lifestyle practices with warming properties are recommended; during spring, those possessing relatively rough or drying properties are advised; whereas during early summer and autumn, cooling foods and lifestyle practices are considered beneficial. These recommendations are based on the seasonal fluctuations of the external elements and their influence on the internal physiological balance of the human body.

The seasonal changes in the external environment directly influence the body's structural and functional components. Therefore, physicians and healthcare practitioners should understand these seasonal influences and provide appropriate dietary and lifestyle guidance to both healthy individuals and patients. Such preventive and therapeutic recommendations are consistent with the fundamental objectives of Sowa-Rigpa, which emphasise disease prevention, the maintenance of health, and the promotion of longevity.

Failure to adapt dietary and lifestyle practices to seasonal changes may disturb the balance of the body's elemental constituents. Excessive, deficient, or inappropriate dietary and behavioural practices may consequently contribute to physiological disturbances, disease development, and, in severe circumstances, premature mortality. Therefore, understanding the relationship between seasonal environmental changes and human physiology is essential for maintaining health and preventing disease.

Taste	**Predominant elements**
Sweet	Earth + Water
Sour	Earth + Fire
Salty	Water + Fire
Bitter	Water + Wind
Pungent	Fire + Wind
Astringent	Earth + Wind

Relationship Between the Five Elements and the Process of Dying

The Five Elements also play an essential role in the process of dying. According to Sowa-Rigpa, the natural elemental forces present within the human body gradually deteriorate as death approaches. This process is described in the *Gyud-Zhi* as the progressive dissolution of the Five Elements and their associated sensory faculties.

The classical text explains:

"As death approaches, the five elements gradually dissolve, accompanied by the sequential dissolution of the five sensory faculties. The functional capacity of Earth dissolves into Water, resulting in the inability to perceive visual forms. The functional capacity of Water dissolves into Fire, causing the bodily openings to become dry. The functional capacity of Fire dissolves into Wind, resulting in the gradual withdrawal of bodily warmth. Finally, the functional capacity of Wind dissolves into Space, resulting in the cessation of external respiration."

This description illustrates the sequential deterioration of elemental functions during the dying process. As the functional capacities of the elements progressively diminish, the corresponding bodily constituents and physiological functions also deteriorate. Ultimately, when the elemental functions sustaining the physical body cease, consciousness, according to the traditional Sowa-Rigpa and Buddhist understanding,

departs from the physical body in accordance with the individual's karmic circumstances and transitions to another state of existence. The physical aggregate then remains as a lifeless body.

Relationship Between the Five Elements and the Internal Organs

The relationship between the Five Elements and human physiology can also be examined through the structural and functional associations of the internal organs and hollow organs (*Don and sNod*). Sowa-Rigpa classical literature describes specific elemental associations among these organs.

According to *sMan-dpyad Zla-ba'i rGyal-po* (The King of Medical Diagnosis and Treatment), the elemental associations of the internal organs are described as follows:

- The heart and small intestine are associated with the Fire element.
- The spleen and stomach are associated with the Earth element.
- The left kidney and reproductive organ are associated with the Water element.
- The lungs and large intestine are associated with the Metal element.
- The liver and gallbladder are associated with the Wood element.
- The right kidney and urinary bladder are associated with the Water element.

Similarly, the classical text *Bod-dmar* explains the relationships among the hollow organs and their corresponding elemental associations. The stomach is associated with the Earth element and is related to the spleen; it serves as a receptacle for food and the accumulation of digestive waste. The urinary bladder is associated with the Water element and is connected with the kidneys, serving as the storage organ for urine. The gallbladder is associated with the Wood element and is connected with the liver, where bile and metabolic waste associated with blood transformation are described.

The reproductive organ, referred to as *bsam-se'u*, is considered a site where the bodily constituents are brought together and is described in relation to the reproductive system. On this basis, six hollow organs are recognised within this classification.

These organ–element relationships also provide a theoretical basis for understanding the interconnections between the internal organs and their respective physiological functions. They are particularly relevant to clinical examination and disease assessment in Sowa-Rigpa.

Clinical Significance of Elemental Relationships in Pulse Diagnosis

In clinical practice, Sowa-Rigpa primarily employs three principal diagnostic methods: visual examination (*lTa-ba*), palpation (*Reg-pa*), and questioning (*Dri-ba*). Among these, pulse examination is particularly important for assessing the functional condition of the internal organs and identifying possible pathological changes.

Pulse examination is conducted with consideration of the seasonal variations and the corresponding changes in the external and internal elemental conditions. The pulse is traditionally regarded as an important means of communication between the patient and the physician, conveying information about the internal physiological condition of the body.

The circulation of blood and the movement of *rLung* (Wind) associated with the heart are reflected in the pulsating characteristics of the arteries. Through careful examination of the pulse at the designated positions beneath the physician's fingers, practitioners can assess the condition of the internal organs and identify indications of health or disease. For example, the pulse characteristics associated with the heart and small intestine are interpreted in relation to the Fire element.

The classical descriptions of organ–element relationships therefore provide an important conceptual framework for interpreting pulse characteristics and understanding the physiological condition of individual organs. They also help practitioners consider the relative predominance and functional activity of the elements within the body.

In general, the Five Elements are present throughout the entire human body, although their relative predominance and functional contributions vary among different tissues and organs. Health is traditionally understood as a state in which the elemental constituents remain in a state of equilibrium (*'Byung-ba mnyam-pa*). Conversely, when their functional balance becomes disturbed, the condition is described as elemental imbalance or disorder (*'Byung-ba 'khrugs-pa*).

Thus, the balance and harmonious functioning of the Five Elements constitute an essential foundation for maintaining physiological stability and health within the Sowa-Rigpa medical system.

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