

Introduction to Thai Element Theory

NEPHYR JACOBSEN

All around the world, traditional medicine systems hold one thing in common: element theory. In ancient civilizations based in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and elsewhere, element theory is based on the idea that all things are made of earth, water, fire, wind, and space. Each culture has its own unique way of assessing and addressing these elements, but when we look beyond the structure of each system, the basic concept is the same: elements are the component parts of all things.

When we speak of elements as components, we mean everything from dirt, metal, and bones to dreams, thoughts, and desires. Not only are flesh and blood made of elements but also human character, tendencies, and disposition toward certain diseases. It is the balance and imbalance of the elements within us and around us that affects our emotional and physical well-being.

In Thailand, element theory is a unifying factor for the five branches of traditional Thai medicine. These branches are internal medicine (*paeta-yasaht*: treatment of the internal body); external medicine (*kayapahpbambat*: bone setting, external application of herbs, Thai massage); spirit medicine (*saiyasaht*: shamanistic healing with spirits, incantations, magical tattooing, amulets); divinatory sciences (*horasaht*: numerology, astrology, and palmistry used to determine elemental and disease predisposition); and Buddhism (*putthayasaht*), which may be viewed as the mental health branch of Thai medicine. All five of these branches incorporate two primary components: Buddhist principles and element theory. These two intrinsic ingredients bind the branches of Thai medicine. Traditional Thai doctors may specialize

Branches of Traditional Thai Medicine		
Internal Medicine	<i>Paetayasaht</i>	Herbs, diet, treatment of internal body
External Medicine	<i>Kayapahpbambat</i>	Massage, bone setting, external application of herbs etc.
Spirit Medicine	<i>Saiyasaht</i>	Healing with spirits, incantations, mantras, objects, shamanistic
Divinatory Medicine	<i>Horasaht</i>	Using systems such as astrology, numerology, palmistry etc. to determine medical predisposition and remedial measures
Buddhism	<i>Putthayasaht</i>	Bringing about cessation of suffering through study and practice of the Buddhist dharma

in one branch, but they will also have a strong background in the other components.

The elements are easiest to understand as they exist in nature, outside of ourselves. A boulder is primarily earth element, a pond is primarily water element, a forest fire is primarily fire element, and the movement of wind through the tall grass is primarily wind element. In our bodies, earth and water make up our flesh and blood (anatomy), and fire and wind are the animating forces that bring us to life (physiology). Earth is the container, water is the fluidity, fire is the heat, and wind is all movement. All things contain all elements in varying amounts. To better understand the elements as they manifest in our individual bodies, let's take a closer look at each element.

Earth (*din*)

Earth element (*din*) has the qualities of being hard, stable, and heavy. It provides resistance and support and an experience of solidity. These attributes are important to understand when we deal with element theory.

One role of *din* is to be a container or vessel for water, fire, and wind. Imagine a slowly moving, warm jungle river. The riverbed and riverbanks form the container, and they are made primarily of earth element. The river itself is primarily made of water element. The warmth of the river comes from fire element, and the movement of the river is wind.

Earth element dominates physical structures, such as buildings, tree trunks, coconut shells, and mountains. It provides a structure within which other

elements may interact. In our bodies it is the structure (but not the movement) of bones, skin, nails, teeth, and organs. Earth supports us, grounds us, and protects us, and it provides defined shape. On a cellular level, our bodies have the same elemental interplay as a river. The cell walls are earth, the fluid within the cells is water, the temperature of the cells is fire, and the movement within is wind. This interplay of elements is constant, and it is everywhere. Because earth element is the heaviest element, it is the slowest one to change, and it is often the last one to be affected.

Water (*naam*)

The primary qualities of water element (*naam*) are that it is moist, fluid, and soft. It provides cohesion and fluidity. Water element dominates all fluids, from tree sap to motor oil, from dew to oceans, from tears to blood. Water provides lubrication and malleability, and it is the glue that holds all things together. Water is a sticky binding agent. If you put two drops of water together, they join to form one drop. Even a boulder, which by its nature is primarily earth element, contains water that holds it together. Without the water, the boulder would be dust.

When considering the element of water, it is helpful to think of still water such as puddles, baths, and ponds, since rivers and oceans also contain a large amount of wind element. Water is the second heaviest element, and therefore, like earth, it is also slow to change.

Fire (*fai*)

The primary qualities of fire element (*fai*) are that it is bright, reactive, and sharp. It has the function of providing transformation and ripening, and the experience of heat. Fire heats our bodies, breaks down our food, encourages transformation, and is the impetus for change. Fire's primary role in the body is the digestion of food. Just as the flames in an active fireplace burn paper and wood, the element of fire in our digestive system breaks down and transforms food into absorbable nutrients. Fire is much lighter than earth or water, and it changes easily.

Wind (*lom*)

The primary qualities of wind element (*lom*) are lightness, mobility, and dryness. The function of wind is to provide growth and vibration, and it has the experience of movement. I am intentionally not using the word "air." Air can be static, but wind is inherently representative of motion. The secondary qualities of wind are cool, light, rough, non-unctuous, subtle, and non-slimy.

Like fire, lom is more of a metabolic force than a physical structure such as earth or water. Wind is movement. From the slow upward growth of a tree to the rapid movement of a ball being kicked; from the flowing of blood in our circulatory system to the rotation of the earth on its axis; from the transfer of electricity between a wall socket and a lamp to the energy of thoughts swirling in our minds. In Thai element theory, all of these motions are considered to be wind element. Though fire is the impetus for movement, wind is the very movement itself. As one of the lightest elements, wind is often the first element to be affected by most circumstances. It changes easily and often.

Space (*aagasathaat*) and consciousness (*winyaanathaat*)

If earth is the container in which water, fire, and wind interact, then space is the canvas upon which they all exist. Space has the qualities of being expansive and subtle. Its function is to provide nonresistance, and a field of activity in which the other elements can exist. The experience of space is openness. In recent times quantum physics has shown us what the ancients knew: that there is more space than there is matter. It is the lightest and most pervasive of all the elements.

In traditional medicine systems, space is often linked to consciousness, and in Thai medicine, knowledge of the element of space includes study of the Buddha's teachings of the Five Skhandas: form, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. We will not discuss the skhandas here, but when studying Buddhism in relation to Thai healing arts, they are important to understand. For a Thai massage therapist, working with space involves the experience of sinking into the receiver's body – allowing thumbs, fingers, palms, and elbows to pass by fascia and muscle, while maintaining awareness of the space between all matter.

Counting the elements

Some traditional medicine practitioners separate consciousness from space, thereby counting six elements. Since space is much more esoteric, some healers base their work on the four most tangible elements: earth, water, fire, and wind. Further, since it is difficult to affect change on earth element, three-element theory is sometimes used, in which only water, fire, and wind are primarily considered. Regardless of the number of elements with which a practitioner works, all the elements exist. Three-element theory, for example, does not negate the existence of earth and space.

Elemental constitution (*thaat jao reuan*) and imbalance

In the first five or six years of human life, our *thaat jao reuan*, or core elemental constitution, is established. During this process, individuals are weighted more toward one specific element. If, for example, you have a predominance of water element, your *thaat jao reuan* is water. As a water element person, you will have certain physical and mental characteristics, as well as certain disease predispositions. Some people have more than one element in nearly equal amounts, in which case their *thaat jao reuan* is a mixture of two, or rarely, of three elements. Earth element is seldom part of a person's core elemental constitution.

Factors that affect *thaat jao reuan* include the season of conception, genetics, geography, diet, and karma. Once a person's *thaat jao reuan* is fully developed, it remains that way for the rest of that person's life. This is not to say that the balance of elements is not prone to shifting. In fact, the elemental balance within a person is constantly shifting, but this is seen as a motion in and out of elemental balance, not a change in *thaat jao reuan*. Thai medicine views *thaat jao reuan* as a baseline for understanding each individual, but it seeks out specific imbalances in order to determine a course of action or healing.

Earth *thaat jao reuan*

Earth element is not often found as part of a core elemental constitution. When it is found, it is often paired with another of the elements.

Physique: A preponderance of earth in a person's makeup will be reflected in a very large skeleton and bone structure. They will also likely have large eyes, a squared figure, a deep resonant voice, and thick hair and nails.

Characteristics: Earth element in a person's core makeup often results in several of the following characteristics: loyalty, being grounded, slowness to change, and a compassionate and balanced nature.

Water *thaat jao reuan*

Physique: When water is the dominating element, it results in physical characteristics such as a large frame, thick hair and eyelashes, large "sweet" eyes, a fleshy body, well-hydrated skin, and a soft melodious voice.

Characteristics: People with a lot of water element tend to be intuitive, compassionate, emotional, malleable (they easily follow other people's lead), and slow to change. They are frequently the glue that holds a relationship or a family together (water is cohesive), and they tend to enjoy sleep, sweets, and less active lifestyles. They learn at a slower pace, but they learn thoroughly, and with long-lasting retention. They can tend toward depression and fear-based anxiety.

Fire *thaat jao reuan*

Physique: People with a strong fire component tend to have medium-sized frames, strong athletic bodies, and reddish coloring (red hair almost always indicates fire element). They often have soft hair that grays early, oily skin, and sharp clear eyes. Oftentimes, their eyes are one of the first things you notice about them.

Characteristics: Fire people are generally intellectual, and they learn quickly. They stay focused in communication, and they often become teachers, politicians, or they assume other roles that require public speaking. Fire people are motivated and follow through on their goals. They tend to be passionate and accomplished. Fire also manifests in a disposition that can easily be brought to anger, and fiery people can sometimes overpower those around them, with or without the intention to do so, as they accomplish their goals.

Wind *thaat jao reuan*

Physique: People with a strong wind element can have either tall or short bodies, but will often have a thin skeletal frame. They often have dark coloring, small eyes, and dry skin.

Characteristics: Like fiery people, windy people have a sharp intelligence. They tend to be creative, and often excel at mathematics and at work that requires calculation. Wind-dominant people often have a lot of ideas, but since the nature of wind implies movement, they often begin projects without finishing them. They are inclined to speak circuitously, and can stray from their subject of focus.

Imbalance

Elements exist in six states: balanced, excited, weakened, deranged (disturbed), broken, and gone (lost). When an element is deranged, it fluctuates between excited and weakened. A broken element implies a serious condition, with life in danger, and when an element is gone, the person is dying or already dead. There are other pathologies related to states of imbalance than those mentioned in this brief overview, but since Thai massage therapists work mostly to restore balance, we will only discuss the states of excited and weakened.

Earth excited: Earth element doesn't go out of balance very easily. As the most dense and most heavy element, it is the last to change in disease progression. When earth is out of balance, it usually results in a serious disorder such as cancer, fibrosis, or organ damage. An earth imbalance can also cause a person to be stubborn and rigid.

Earth weakened: A weakened earth element may result in weak tissues and bones, a lack of focus, and a sense of being ungrounded.

Water excited: Water element in an excited state can result in excessive emotions, depression, obesity, reproductive issues, and diseases of agitated water such as colds, mucous, respiratory conditions, and water retention. The more watery we are, the more we tend to retain toxins in our body.

Water weakened: Water in a weakened state can cause dry skin, constipation, rigidity, reproductive issues, problems with lymph glands and blood, dehydration, and other symptoms. Weakened water may also contribute to excess fire and wind conditions.

Fire excited: Excited fire may lead to heat stroke, rash, acne, and other symptoms of redness. It may also contribute to liver damage, temper and anger issues, fever, and overdigestion of food.

Fire weakened: Low-functioning fire element can lead to poor digestion, lowered body temperature, lack of will and strength, and it may fuel symptoms of excited water or wind.

Wind excited: Wind in an excited state can cause anxiety, pain, headaches, arthritis, insomnia, diarrhea or constipation, and obsessive-compulsive and other mental health disorders. It may bring about dry skin, result in the inability to concentrate or to stay warm, and it may fuel symptoms of weakened water element.

Wind weakened: A low-functioning wind element can cause lethargy, poor circulation, headaches, constipation, poor digestion, and neurological conditions that inhibit movement.

Thai bodywork for balancing the elements

For the most part, elemental imbalances are corrected through dietary change, lifestyle modifications, and internal herbal medicine; however, bodywork can and should be used to complement and support these changes. Thai medicine is a holistic system, and external therapies support internal healing, and vice

Thai Massage for Elements	
Water	Stretching • Twisting • Cupping • Dry heat therapies • Warming balms and liniments • Faster rhythm • Work towards the core • Use care with pressure
Fire	Moderate rhythm • Deep sen work • Plucking • Compression • Cooling balms and liniments • Cupping and scraping • Work away from the core
Wind	Calm rhythm • Balanced work • Sequence work • Traction • Use warming oils •

versa. When using bodywork to treat elemental imbalances, Thai therapists should only attempt therapies in which they have been adequately trained. Elemental balance is encouraged by specific techniques, adjusted speed and rhythm, and sometimes by using tools such as balms and liniments.

Thai bodywork for excited water

People with excited water benefit from invigorating bodywork that is done at a faster pace. Stretching and twisting are recommended, and also Thai fire cupping therapy. Dry heat therapies, such as dry hot herbal compresses, dry saunas, and warming balms and liniments can also be beneficial. Be careful not to work too deeply, especially with point work and *sen* line work, since those with excited water can bruise easily. Work toward the body's core, where water and stored toxins can be processed by the body.

Thai bodywork for excited fire

Those with agitated fire should be treated at a moderate pace, to encourage states of relaxation and calm, but don't work so slowly that it makes the receiver frustrated. Deep *sen* line work, stretches, plucking, and compression are indicated, as are cooling balms and liniments. Thai cupping and body scraping can help to release excess heat. Work away from the core of the body to disperse excess heat.

Thai bodywork for excited wind

People with overly active wind require very balanced, slow bodywork. Work in a smooth, flowing way, move your client as little as possible, and focus on calm grounding movements and techniques. Standard Thai massage sequences are fine, as long as they are not based entirely on stretches. Traction to the joints is beneficial, but deep, extended stretches are not. Focus more on compression and *sen* line work, and don't move your client around more than necessary. Rubbing warming oils into the *sen* lines, or even performing an oil massage is often beneficial for excess wind. If a client has excited mental wind (anxiety, can't stop thinking, worrying), try working from the top of the body down to the feet.

I have not suggested ideas for bodywork with regard to earth element because imbalanced earth brings about conditions such as cancers and tumors that cannot be adequately addressed with Thai massage. Of course, people suffering from these types of afflictions can benefit from bodywork, but the work can't be a course of treatment for the disease. Earth element is always important, however, because it's what the therapist primarily touches; it is the

dominant element in the structure of skin, muscle, fascia, tendons, and ligaments. In fact, earth and wind are the main elements that all bodyworkers address when they work with clients. By freeing blockages, we encourage movement (wind, lom).

A doorway into traditional Thai medicine

When I first began learning Thai massage, I believed that what made it “Thai” was the lack of a massage table, the client being clothed, assisted stretches, the concept of sen lines, and the lack of oil. I understand now that traditional Thai massage is not complete without the use of Thai medicine theory. If Thai element theory, sen line theory, acupuncture theory, and other Thai therapies guide your bodywork choices, then you are working within the Thai tradition. Sometimes this doesn’t seem like the type of Thai massage that is taught to most Westerners. It is entirely possible, for example, to apply Thai medicine theory to rub a person’s body with sesame oil, or to not perform stretches, or to work on some areas of the body and not on others.

This essay is meant to be a doorway into the elemental theory of traditional Thai medicine. Understanding Thai element theory can be transformational in a Thai massage practice. It launches the work from systemic maintenance to knowledge-based therapy which can be used to address imbalances, injuries, and chronic troubles. Unfortunately, most people who learn Thai massage are not taught theory. When I first became interested in Thai medicine theory, some people told me that all the Thai theory was lost when Ayutthaya was destroyed. Others said that Thai medicine was entirely taken from Indian Ayurveda. It’s difficult for Westerners to find teachers and schools that can properly explain Thai medicine theory, but excellent teachers do certainly exist. I encourage all who are interested to seek out this training.