

Element theory: assessment and treatment

Introduction

For unknown millennia, major civilizations around the world have used element theory as a way to assess, understand, and treat others, and as a way to appreciate and view the nature and complexity of all matter and all living beings.

Ancient advanced civilizations in Greece, Babylonia, Japan, China, Tibet, India, Mexico, and Southeast Asia all considered the major elements of wind, fire, water, and earth. A fifth element, space, was also sometimes considered as a point of reference for the other elements. In some cultures the element of wind is also known as "air" or "steam" and the fifth element as "void" or "ether." Ancient philosophers and doctors in many cultures have presented a variety of explanations about the attributes of elements, and how they relate to all observable phenomena. In addition to health issues, these theories have sometimes overlapped with cosmology, mythology, spirituality, and the esoteric arts.

Similar to the way elements are presented in other traditions and cultures, element theory in Thai medicine considers wind, fire, water, and earth, and space is sometimes considered as a fifth element. Since most Thai massage therapists do not professionally treat patients by prescribing medicine, knowledge of the elements is helpful to determine an appropriate treatment through massage.



The ability to recognize elemental predisposition, or an excess, deficiency, or imbalance of elements in an individual is a valuable tool in client maintenance and sustenance. Even basic knowledge of Thai element theory can help a therapist to structure an adequate sequence for each individual and determine a proper course of action with regard to pace, balance, flow, and pressure. Working with knowledge of the elements also helps us to avoid certain contraindicated poses and techniques and encourages us to use others which could be more beneficial.

Traditional Thai element theory

Wind: lom – ลม

Wind causes—and is part of—all movement. We need it to navigate life and change and adapt from one circumstance to another. *Lom* is the force behind all motion. It allows blood to circulate, breath to move in and out, and nerve impulses and thoughts to flow. Wind may move too fast, too slow, or become obstructed or blocked. Disturbances in the functions of wind can result in disrupted, sluggish, or irregular movement. Agitated wind can cause headaches, insomnia, lack of focus, restlessness, distraction, dry skin, and other conditions.

Fire: *fai* – ไฟ

Fire is passion, the great motivating force, and it helps people to achieve their goals. Excess fire in the body results in an accumulation of heat, so a person may sweat or urinate more often. Skin may erupt in rashes, pimples or acne; a person may get feverish, feel agitated, raise his voice, or have a reactive temperament. The tissues of the body may also become inflamed. A lack of fire in the body results in cold sensations. As the body tries to hold onto heat, there is a decrease in sweating, urination, and bowel elimination. The skin may take on a gray or pale tone, food may be poorly digested, and the mind may have difficulty processing new information.

Water: *naam* – น้ำ

Water is the glue that connects and combines things. It is an important element for compassion, healing, understanding, and much more. Agitated water element can result in intense emotions, depression, obesity, reproductive problems, colds, and respiratory conditions. A person's mood might also be altered, which could result in them feeling confused, emotional, and indecisive. Digestion may become impaired, appetite may be reduced, and food may move more slowly through the digestive system. *Naam* that is weakened may bring about conditions such as dehydration, dry skin, weight loss, and a reduction in urination and sweating.

Earth: *din* – ดิน

Earth element manifests in all that is tangible. It brings about loyalty, grounding, strength, and a compassionate and balanced nature. *Din* is the densest and heaviest element, the last to change in the progression of disease, and it does not go out of balance easily. When it does become imbalanced, serious conditions may result, such as cancer, loss of muscle mass, osteoporosis, reduction of body fat, and organ damage. An imbalance of earth element can lead someone to be stubborn yet unable to stand up to the challenges of the world. When earth element is balanced and working in harmony with the other elements, we feel confident, full of conviction, and open to life, but when earth element dominates, we may become rigid and resistant to change.

Space: agaat taat – อวกาศ

Space is emptiness, the most esoteric and most subtle of the elements. It is the place where all the elements interact. If you imagine a painting with many different colors, shapes, and textures, space is the canvas. Space is the infinite sky, where heat, cold, rain, wind, movement, and planets coexist and interact. For a bodyworker, working with space during treatments means sinking into layers of the receiver's body; working on one layer at a time; applying and holding pressure at an appropriate depth; allowing thumbs, fingers, palms, and feet to gradually pass through fascia and muscles; and maintaining awareness and consideration of the emptiness between all matter.

Thai massage guidelines for elemental balance

Here are some examples of techniques and concepts that can be used with people who have an excess of water, fire, or wind.

Water predominance – for clients who manifest a state of agitated or increased water

Twisting techniques: In supine position, you might use a cross-leg spinal twist, or twist the legs inward and outward while holding the feet. In seated position, you might use any of the upper torso twists common in Thai massage.

Stretching techniques: Most traditional Thai stretching techniques may successfully be used for “watery” people. In supine position, you might pull on the legs and arms and hold them in place for a few seconds. In supine or seated position, you might stretch the neck while pulling the arm or compressing the shoulder. In prone position, you might lift the legs upward or bend them toward the person's head, and use assisted cobra techniques.

Heat: Use dry heat therapies, and “hot” balms, compresses, and liniments. Hot rubbing balms generally include ingredients such as ginger, *plai* (Thai ginger), eucalyptus, camphor, borneol camphor, clove, and turmeric.

Other: Work at a regular pace. Whenever possible, try to work toward the center of the body; for example, when working on the extremities. Be careful when applying pressure, since the skin of “watery” people can sometimes bruise easily. When applying pressure, sink in slowly and incrementally through the layers.

Fire predominance -- for clients who manifest a state of agitated or increased fire

Techniques: Make sure to work the *sen* lines thoroughly with palming and thumbing protocols. Stimulate the lines with plucking techniques (*jap sen*). Cupping and scraping techniques may also be beneficial, as well as compressions.

Cool: Use “cool” salves, compresses, and liniments. Balms with herbs such as lemongrass, kaffir lime, pennywort, peppermint, and plantain leaf are considered “cool,” and are used to help reduce fire.

Other: Work at a slow to moderate pace. Try to work away from the center of the body, so as to dissipate the fire. Avoid using quick, jerky techniques, because if you do, more wind may be added to the existing fire. Instead, hold and compress blocked areas for longer periods of time.

Wind predominance – for clients who manifest a state of agitated or increased wind

Techniques: Work sequentially, but avoid using techniques that move the body too quickly. Use slow, grounding techniques and compressions. Integrate traction and suspension techniques whenever appropriate.

Heat: Use “hot” balms, oils, compresses, and liniments. Hot herbal compresses are particularly beneficial.

Other: Work at a slow pace, and use slow rhythms and meditative rocking patterns. Flow gracefully and smoothly from one technique to the next, and always work in a balanced way. Work both sides of the body in a similar way. For example, after you work on one foot and lower leg, then work on the other foot and lower leg. Proceed incrementally in a balanced way during the entire session.

| Thai Massage for Elements | |
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| 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 <i>sen</i> 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 • |

Working with the elements – a summary

Keeping the above information in mind, how would you adapt your work to address an excess of a particular element? Well, sometimes it's not unlike what you might do in real life. What would you do, for example, if a pile of dry leaves caught on fire? You would try to separate and disperse the central flame by spreading the burning leaves away from the center of the fire (work away from the center of the body); you would suffocate the flames by covering them or containing them somehow (hold the body in place with compressions for longer periods of time); and you would avoid adding more air to the fire (minimize quick or jerky movements).

Until recently, this important information hasn't been available to those learning traditional Thai massage. Most Thai massage teachers around the world, and even Thai people who go through formal training programs in Thailand, have little knowledge of traditional Thai element theory, nor do they apply its wisdom in their practice with students and clients. Some teachers in the West complicate matters further by teaching Thai massage through a framework of Indian Ayurveda or traditional Chinese medicine, which results in misinformed students and therapists.

For many years Thai element theory was somewhat guarded by those who maintained the old traditions, and proficiency in reading and speaking the Thai language was needed in order to access this body of knowledge. Fortunately, and thanks to the work of several committed individuals in Thailand and the West, information that was previously unavailable to Westerners has slowly begun to spread to a small number of serious and dedicated practitioners. It is my hope that more bodywork professionals, especially those who practice traditional Thai massage, will take element theory into consideration as an important guideline for treating their clients. When Thai element theory is used as a basis for the practice of Thai healing arts, it opens up new ways of working, helps to create customized treatments for each individual, and dignifies and distinguishes traditional Thai medicine from other healing arts.

--- written by Bob Haddad,
based on information from various sources