

AGNI AND SOMA: A UNIVERSAL CLASSIFICATION

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“He who discovers that all this is Agni and Soma,
and is not affected by extraordinary feelings,
is truly liberated”.
*Mahābhārata*¹

It is a special pleasure to be able to present this study to my friend and colleague Arion Roşu. He has done so much to bring clarity and understanding to some of the most interesting and difficult topics in the history of Indian culture, including of course India's medical and alchemical traditions. I do not imagine that the topic discussed here will be new to him, but I hope that this essay will nevertheless provide enjoyment. It is offered in friendship and admiration.

In the literature of classical Indian medicine, Āyurveda, writers and commentators remark from time to time that the world is divided in nature into a binary taxonomy of Agni and Soma. The category of Agni-related items includes everything of a hot, fiery, dry, or parching type, while Soma-related items are moist, nourishing, soothing, and cooling. Items so classified range from medicinal herbs to mountain ranges to the seasons of the year. “The whole world,” says one author, “is of the nature of Agni and Soma.” From the earliest Vedic hymns to Agni and Soma, through the later philosophical, medical, alchemical and tantric literatures, these two categories of classification and thought were used continuously as an explanatory device. Where does this classification begin, and what can it mean?

¹ 12.277.33: *agnīṣomāv idaṃ sarvaṃ iti yaś cānupaśyati
na ca saṃsprśyate bhāvair adbhutair mukta eva saḥ*

The Vedas and Upaniṣads

Historically, Agni and Soma are not first of all abstract entities: they are the fire of the Vedic ritual, and the plant whose juice is imbibed by the priests at such rituals. But in the earliest sources, both these things are already embedded in a web of ritual and mythological meaning. “The important relation between myth and ritual is very evident in the Vedic tradition: Agni and Soma are ritual objects and divinities with a developed personal mythology; ... The most important RV ritual is that of the preparation, offering, and consumption of the sacred drink, Soma; ... Other important rituals include the kindling and worship of fire [which is] identified with the fire in the sun”². Agni and Soma are personified, praised, and worshipped as gods in the ancient Vedic pantheon. As the ritual fire, Agni is the mouth of the sacrifice, through which the gods are fed³; Soma is the plant at the centre of great ritual activity. Its expressed sap is drunk to stimulate the poets of the Ṛg Veda⁴. Soma is also the gleaming white drop of fluid, and is commonly hymned through metaphors based on waters, streams, and rain. In rituals and interpretations after the period of the Ṛg Veda, Soma came to be identified with the moon, the cooling and fluid antithesis to the Sun⁵. “The soma plant is visualized in the Rig Veda as a god and as a liquid...”⁶. In Vedic ritual, Agni and Soma are invoked more than any other gods, as embodiments of the sacrificial fire and the sacrificial drink. Their roles and features are distinct:

Agni is Apollonian, explaining the sacrifice; he represents the cultivated, cooked, cultured aspects of ritual. Soma is Dionysian, explaining the vision of life; he represents the wild, raw, disruptive aspects of ritual⁷.

One whole vedic book – of the ten which have come down to us – is entirely devoted to hymns to King Soma, a divine and royal figure

² WITZEL 2003, p. 73 f.

³ KEITH 1925: I, p. 154-66; II, p. 318 f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, p. 166-72; II, p. 326-32.

⁵ KEITH 1925: II, p. 332 is firm in his view that the identification of Soma with the moon is a conceptual development post-dating the Ṛg Veda. For a succinct characterisation of the Soma plant in the Veda, see MACDONELL and KEITH 1982: II, p. 474-9. There is a substantial literature on Soma, whose plant identity has been the subject of much speculation. The research is best summarised by DONIGER O’FLAHERTY 1968, PARPOLA 1995, NYBERG 1995 and FALK 1989, 2002-2003. STAAL 1983 is the classic description and analysis of the Soma ritual.

⁶ DONIGER O’FLAHERTY 1981, p. 119.

⁷ DONIGER O’FLAHERTY 1981, p. 97.

who simultaneously represents a sacred plant which is central to the liturgical rites, and the moon.

Upaniṣadic thought

The more philosophical literature of the early to mid- first millennium BC explored, explained, and reinterpreted the Vedic ritual and its hymns, and this duality of *agni* and *soma* developed into an identifiable philosophical understanding of the world. In this interpretation, as expressed in the *Chāndogya*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, and *Kauṣītaki upaniṣads*, it is possible to identify three fundamental views, that the historian of philosophy Frauwallner named “The Water Doctrine”, “The Fire Doctrine”, and the “Doctrine of Breath”⁸.

According to the Water Doctrine, life-giving water flows out of the moon, and enters a cycle through life, returning ultimately to its source. This notion is linked with the idea of transmigration, and with the idea of two different paths which the dead may take: the path of the manes (*pitṛyānam*) and the path of the gods (*devayānam*).

The Doctrine of Breath is based on the close association between breath and life. A well-known passage in the *Chāndogya upaniṣad* presents a quarrel of the personified life-forces regarding their rank. For one year, each of Speech, Eyes, Ears, Mind, and Semen leave the body, and during that period the body is not able to speak, see, etc. But when Breath leaves the body, all the other forces are also dragged out of the body, and they admit their subordinate position. The notion of the breath of life is discussed further and in detail in these texts. Wind or breath does not, however, have an explicit function in regard to the afterlife, and Frauwallner characterises this doctrine as limited, and ultimately as a failure.

The Doctrine of Fire is “by far the most important of all”, according to Frauwallner, and he sees in it the climax of Vedic philosophy⁹. This is the doctrine which places Fire in the central position as the life-bearing element. As in the case of the Water Doctrine, ideas of transmigration are important in the Fire Doctrine, since the Sun is not only a celestial body, but is also a door to heaven, a gateway to the world of heaven, and especially a gateway leading to freedom from recurrent

⁸ FRAUWALLNER 1984, I, p. 36-47, first published in German in 1953. KIRFEL 1951 had earlier raised many important and interesting points on the same topic, discussed below, but he did not connect the water-fire duality with Agni and Soma either.

⁹ FRAUWALLNER 1984, I, p. 45.

death, from the cycle of *saṃsāra*. For all his sharp insight, Frauwallner seems not to have realized that he was describing the fundamental elements of the medical humours of classical Āyurveda. The Fire, Breath, and Water doctrines correspond exactly to the Bile, Wind, and Phlegm of the physicians. The fact that Frauwallner's religious and philosophical sources from the first millennium BC do not make this link explicit incidentally confirms evidence from early Buddhism and elsewhere that the Indian humoral theory was formalized only in the late first millennium BC, and perhaps only at about the time of the Buddha (d. ca. 400 BC)¹⁰.

Thus we see that there were identifiable currents of thought starting from the earliest layer of Vedic literature, through the intervening philosophical texts of the first millennium BC, and into the classical period, in which Agni and Soma were seen as defining characteristics in the universe, and as intimately bound up in the life of man and his environment, and with his passage at death to further worlds.

Agni and Soma in Āyurveda

The āyurvedic classification of the world according to Agni and Soma is particularly prominent in one of India's earliest medical classics, the *Suśrutasamhitā* or "Suśruta's *Compendium*"¹¹. The first versions of this work were probably composed at the end of the first millennium BC, and revisions and additions continued to be made until perhaps as late as the fourth century AD.¹² Suśruta's *Compendium* is one of the two early major encyclopedias of classical Indian medicine, the other being the *Carakasamhitā* or "*Compendium of Caraka*", and these two works between them define and delineate Āyurveda, or classical Indian medicine¹³.

Studying the *Suśrutasamhitā*'s description of the pharmacology of medicinal plants, one is struck by an unexpected statement that "the whole world is essentially fire and water". The actual words translated as

¹⁰ ZYSK 1998 develops this argument.

¹¹ The standard edition is by TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992 and the standard complete translation is that of SHARMA 1999-2001. Selections are translated in WUJASTYK 2003.

¹² The dating of the layers of this work is complex and uncertain. See the comprehensive survey of the issues by MEULENBELD 1999-2002: IA, p. 333-57 (henceforth *HIML*).

¹³ This usage is merely practical; medical traditions that could also be termed "classical" exist in South Indian Tamil society, and in the later Perso-Arabic society.

“fire” and “water” are *agni* and *soma*, key concepts from the earliest period of Indian cultural history, which I shall explore below.

This concept appears in a number of places elsewhere in the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*. I shall begin by surveying these passages¹⁴.

Suśruta

Flavours and humours

In the *Sūtrasthāna*, chapter 42, the author discusses the six canonical tastes or savours (*rasa*), the qualities present in all medicines and foodstuffs¹⁵, and puts them into a relationship with the three humours of classical Indian medicine, i.e., air, bile, and phlegm. Different combinations of the savours augment or suppress the humours in turn:

Thus, sweet, sour and salt remove wind; sweet, bitter and astringent remove bile; pungent, bitter, and astringent remove phlegm¹⁶.

Next, the author notes the sources of the humours: the origin of wind is the self, bile is fiery (the word used is “*āgneya*,” the adjectival form of “*agni*”), and phlegm is watery (“*saumya*” from “*soma*”)¹⁷. It is at this point that the author cites the alternative binary view held by “some people” that because the whole natural world (*jagat*) is essentially characterised by fieriness and wateriness, *agni* and *soma*, so the flavours too can be categorised as fiery or watery.

Some say that because of the world is of the nature of fieriness and wateriness, so tastes are twofold: watery and fiery. Sweet, bitter and

¹⁴ The *agni/soma* duality is present also in the *Carakasamhitā*, e.g., Ca.ci. 3 (*jvara*), 32 (fever is of two kinds, *saumya* and *āgneya*), but is not as fully developed as in the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*.

¹⁵ It is not always clear whether medical authors are thinking of the *rasas* as qualities (*guṇa*), like flavours, or as substances (*dravya*), rather like the “ingredients” or “flavourings” in contemporary packaged foodstuffs. This is a topic for future clarification.

¹⁶ Su.sū. 42.4 (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 184): *tatra, madhurāmlalavaṇā vātaghnāḥ, madhuratiktakaṣāyāḥ pittaghnāḥ, kaṭutiktakaṣāyāḥ śleṣmaghnāḥ* || 4 ||. For a further discussion of the six canonical savours, see WUJASTYK 2003, ch. 6; on their combinations, see WUJASTYK 2000.

¹⁷ Su.sū. 42.5 (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 184): *tatra vāyor ātmaivātmā, pittam āgneyam, śleṣmā saumya iti* || 5 ||.

astringent are watery flavours; pungent, sour and salty are fiery. The watery savours are cooling, the fiery ones are heating¹⁸.

Unfortunately we do not know who these “some people” are; perhaps the expression is merely rhetorical. It is nevertheless of great interest to have the view stated thus boldly. It is a grand classification, a division of all things into the world into two all-inclusive categories. It inevitably reminds us of the Chinese doctrine of yin and yang, originally the shadowed and illuminated sides of a hill, later generalized and theorized into a universal scheme of classification.

This grouping of the flavours, and the use of the terms “cooling (*śīta*)” and “heating (*uṣman*)” also connects them with the āyurvedic binary concept of potency, *vīrya*, which is discussed next.

Potency

In *Sūtrasthāna* 40.5, the author is in the middle of a discussion about the relative importance of the different pharmacological categories. Some authorities, he says, propose that the main pharmacological principle is substance (*dravya*), since it is permanent and unchanging. Opponents of this view claim that it is not substance, but rather tastes (*rasa*) which are primary. This is argued on the basis of textual authority, inference, and scripture, the three canonical means of valid cognition. Opponents of both these views argue for the primacy of the category of potency (*vīrya*), on the grounds that it is only by virtue of their potency that medicines are effective at all. (The notion of “potency” covers all effective power or efficacy within a drug.) It is in this context that we find again the extraordinary claim that the entire world is essentially fire and water, *agni* and *soma*.

Others say, “no, potency is primary”. Why? Because the drug’s action is derived from its power. Thus, drug actions include: purging above, below, or from both parts, pacifying, constipating, appetising, compressing, slimming, fattening, lengthening life, causing sexual desire, causing or allaying oedema, burning, tearing, intoxicating, harming the breath of life, or alleviating poison. These exist because of the primacy of potency.

¹⁸ Su.sū. 42.7 (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 184): *kecid āhuḥ - agnīsomīyatvāj jagato rasā dvidvidhāḥ - saumyā āgneyāś ca | madhuratiktakaṣāyāḥ saumyāḥ kaṭvamlalavaṇā āgneyāḥ | tatra madhurāmlalavaṇāḥ snigdḥā guravaś ca, kaṭutiktakaṣāyā rūkṣā laḡhavaś ca, saumyāḥ śītāḥ, āgneyā uṣmā || 7 ||*.

Furthermore, there are two kinds of potency, hot and cold, because the world is of the nature of *agni* and *soma* ...¹⁹.

This claim is made as a self-evident fact, and as the reason for a more mundane observation, namely that potency is of two kinds, hot and cold. Curiously, the principle pre-modern commentator on *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, the eleventh-century scholar Ḍalhaṇa, passes over these statements in silence²⁰.

It is probable that this concept of potency, one of the principle categories used for the pharmacological classification of foods and medicines, is historically continuous with the universal contemporary Indian concepts of 'hot' and 'cold' foods²¹.

Terrain and season

In *Sūtrasthāna* 36.5, the author is discussing various types of landscape or terrain. He cites certain authorities who hold the opinion that the various parts of a medicinal plant are best taken according to the seasons. Thus the,

- root should be taken in the cool season (*prāvṛt*), the
- leaf in the monsoon (*varṣā*), the
- bark in autumn (*śarat*), the
- sap or latex (*kṣīra*) in winter (*hemānta*), the
- juice (*sāra*) in spring (*vasanta*), and the
- fruit in summer (*grīṣma*)²².

To this, an opponent counters that watery (*saumya*) plants should be taken during the watery seasons, and fiery ones (*āgneya*) during the fiery part of the year.

¹⁹ Su.sū. 40.5 (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 174-6): *nety āhur anye, vīryam pradhānam iti kasmāt tadvaśenauśadhakarmaniṣpatteḥ | ihauśadhakarmāny ūrdhvādhobhāgobhayabhāgasamśodhanasamśamanasāmgrāhikāgnidīpanapīḍana lekhanabrṃhaṇarasāyanavājīkaraṇaśvayathukaravilayanadahanaḍāraṇamādana prāṇarnaghaviṣaprasamanādīni vīryaprādhānyād bhavanti | tac ca vīryam-dvidīdam uṣṇamśītaṃca, agniśomīyatvāj jagataḥ |... || 5 ||*.

²⁰ TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 176.

²¹ See further discussion below, p. 361.

²² Su.sū. 36.5 (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 159): *atra kecid āhur ācāryāḥ - prāvṛḍ varṣāśaraddhemantavasantaḡr iṣmeṣu yathāsamkhyam mūlapatratvakṣīrasāra-phalāny ādadīte |*.

Regarding this, some professors say the following: roots, leaves, bark, latex, sap, and fruits should be collected in the early rains, rains, autumn, early winter, spring and summer respectively. But that is not correct, because the world is of the nature of *soma* and *agni*. Medical herbs of the nature of *soma* should be collected during the *saumya* seasons, and those of the nature of *agni* during the *āgneya* ones. In this way, their qualities will not be adversely affected. Medical herbs of the nature of *soma* that are collected during the *saumya* seasons, and that grow on land which is abundant in *saumya* characteristics, grow very sweet, unctuous, and cooling. The rest is explained in the same way²³.

This *agni/soma* view is a simplification of the earlier view, and as such rather uncharacteristic of Sanskrit academic discourse, which generally tends to multiply categories²⁴. The reason given for this simpler view is that, once again, the world is essentially fiery and watery, of the nature of *agni* and *soma*. When the author observes that during the watery seasons (i.e., monsoon, winter, cool), the earth abounds in the qualities of *soma*, and that this causes the characteristics of sweetness, smoothness, and coolness to predominate, the commentator adds that during autumn, spring, and summer, the earth abounds in the quality of fire, and so pungency (*kaṭu*), dryness (*rūkṣa*), and heat (*uṣṇa*) predominate²⁵. Once again, in this passage we see the idea that the whole ecosystem (*jagat*) is essentially divided into fiery and watery categories. This is presented again as a self-evident axiom. In contrast to the previous passage, however, the *agni/soma* point of view is here adopted by the speaker, in contrast to the view of “some professors.”

Sap and blood

In *Sūtrasthāna* 14, the author is discussing the nature of chyle (*rasa*), as a prelude to discussing blood²⁶. Chyle is described as the fine, hot, fully converted essence of digested food, which starts in the heart and flows through the whole body.

²³ *Ibid.*, cont.: *tat tu na samyak, saumyāgneyatvāj jagataḥ | saumyāny auṣadhāni saumyeṣv ṛtuṣv ādadita, āgneyāny āgneyeṣu, evam avyāpannaguṇāni bhavanti | saumyāny auṣadhāni saumyeṣv ṛtuṣu gṛhītāni somaguṇabhūyiṣṭhāyāṃ bhūmau jātāny atimadhurasnigdhaśītāni jāyante | etena śeṣaṃvyākhyātam || 5 ||*. This topic is also discussed in the *Carakasamhitā, Kalpasthāna*, chapter 1 (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1981, p. 651-6), but without reference to *agni* and *soma*.

²⁴ See the classic study of the Indic classification by SMITH 1994.

²⁵ *Ḍalhaṇa ad Su.sū. 36.5 (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 159): ... āgneyeṣu śaradvasantagrīṣmeṣu |...*

²⁶ The word *rasa* here means not “taste” as above, but “nutritive juice” or “chyle”.

Food is formed out of the five elements. It is of four types²⁷, has six savours, two (or eight) potencies, and many qualities. Once eaten and properly converted, it has an extremely fine, fiery essence (*tejobhūtaḥ sārah*) which is called the chyle (*rasa*). It is located in the heart.

From the heart it enters the twenty-four pipes. Ten go up, ten go down, and four are horizontal. Then, through an invisible agency, it refreshes the whole body, day in, day out, making it grow, holding it up, motivating it. One can mark its passage as it courses through the body by inference based on whether diseases are caused by diminution or by superfluity²⁸.

Although the chyle has just been said to have a “fiery” essence, the question is now posed as to whether it really is of the nature of fire, or rather of *soma*.

There is a query about this chyle coursing through all parts of the body, through the humours, body tissues, impurities, and organs: is it watery (*saumya*) or hot (*taijasa*)? On this point it is said that on account of certain features, including the fact that it is unctuous, stimulating, refreshing, and supportive, this flowing liquid is known to be of the watery principle (*saumya*)²⁹.

Thus, in spite of this nutritive essence having been called hot earlier, it is now classed as a watery, *saumya* substance. This essence or sap is said to reach the kidneys and spleen, and is there dyed red³⁰. At this point two traditional verses are cited, from an unknown source:

The pure water in people’s bodies is dyed (*rañjita*) by the clear, fiery principle (*tejas*) which is present in the body. For this reason it is called blood (*rakta*).

²⁷ I.e., chewed, drunk, licked, and eaten.

²⁸ Su.sū. 14.3 (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 59): *tatra pāñcabhautikasya caturvidhasya śaḍrasasya dvividhavīryasyāṣṭavidhavīryasya vānekaguṇasyopayuktasyāhārasya samyakparīnatasya yas tejobhūtaḥ sārah paramasūkṣmaḥ sa rasah, ity ucyate, tasya hṛdayaṃ sthānaṃ | sa hṛdayāc caturviṃśati dhamanir anupraviśyordhvagā daśa daśādhogāminyaś catasraś ca tiryaggāḥ kṛtsnaṃ śarīram aharahas tarpayati vardhayati dhārayati yāpayati cādr̥ṣṭahetukena karmaṇā | tasya śarīram anusarato ’numānād gatir upalakṣayitavyā kṣayavṛddhivaikṛtaiḥ |...*

²⁹ *Ibid.*: *tasmin sarvaśarīrāvayavadoṣadhātumalāśayānusārīṇi rase jijñāsā kim ayaṃ saumyas taijasa iti atrocyate sa khalu dravānusārī snehanajīvanatarpaṇa-dhāraṇādibhir viśeṣaiḥ saumya ity avagamyate || 3 ||*

³⁰ Su.sū. 14.4 (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 59): *sa khalv āpyo raso yakṛtphānanau prāpya rāgam upaiti || 4 ||.*

A woman's blood, which issues from that same chyle, is termed 'menstrual blood' (*rajas*). It starts in the twelfth year and ends in the fiftieth³¹.

The first verse uses etymological analogy as an argument for the Sanskrit name of blood: the words for "to dye" and "blood" are derived from the same grammatical root form. After these quoted verses, the main text continues,

Blood that is menstrual blood is fiery (*āgneya*) because the embryo is of the essence of *agni* and *soma*³².

The commentator Ḍalhana spells out the fact that the woman's menstrual blood is fiery, in contrast to the man's semen which is of the nature of *soma*, and it is their union that creates an embryo³³. Once again we have the principles of *agni* and *soma*, this time being used to explain a key feature of the body, and the formation of the embryo itself.

Lethal points

There is a theory shared by āyurveda and the traditional Indian martial arts, that there are 107 "lethal points" on the human body³⁴. These are points which are considered especially dangerous and sensitive. The

³¹ *Ibid.*: ślokau cātra bhavataḥ |
rañjitās tejasā tvāpaḥ śarīrasthena dehinām |
avyāpannāḥ prasannena raktam ity abhidhīyate || 5 ||
rasād eva striyā raktam rajaḥ sanjñam pravartate |
tad varṣād dvādaśād ūrdhvaṃ yāti pañcāśataḥ kṣayam || 6 ||.

³² *Ibid.*: ārtavaṃ śonitam tv āgneyam, agniśomīyatvād garbhasya || 7 ||.

³³ TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 59-60: raktārtavayoḥ saumyarasasaṃ bhūtayor api svabhāvabhedaṃ darśayann āha, - ārtavam ity ādi | tuśabdo'tra bhede, tena rasāt saumyāj jātam apy ārtavaṃ śonitam cāgneyam | kutaḥ kāraṇād ity āha, - agniśomīyatvād garbhasyeti | ārtavaṃ āgneyam, śukram saumyam, tābhyam agniśomiyo garbho bhavati |. After more discussion, Ḍalhana notes that in fact professors believe that blood is neither hot nor cold (*ibid.*: raktam punar anuṣṇaśītam evam ācāryā manyante || 7 ||).

³⁴ ROṢU'S 1981 study of the history of the *marmans* is seminal. Among many interesting points, he highlights the parallels between the Indian ideas on marmans, formal gymnastic combat, and several Chinese traditions including those which went into the formation of the Tai Ji Quan in the nineteenth century, and those of acupuncture. See also the studies of FEDOROVA 1990, STAAL 1993, and ZARRILLI 1998. For the Tamil homologue *varman*, see, e.g., SUBRAMANIAM 1994.

surgeon must at all costs avoid piercing such points; the wrestler or boxer must target them in his contest. These lethal points are described in the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* (Su.śā. 6). However, it is the sixth-century author Vāgbhaṭa, who often succinctly clarifies and synthesizes the earlier classics, who gives the more vivid characterisation of a lethal point as a place

... which pulsates irregularly and which hurts when pressed. It is a point at which the flesh, bone, sinews, pipes, ducts, and junctions all meet, where life is strongly present. That is why it is called a 'lethal point' (*marman*). The lethal points are categorized according to what predominates, and are thus reckoned as being of six types. However, a common feature of the lethal points is the fact that the breath of life is located in them, and they are thus considered partake of a unity also described³⁵.

Any damage to such a point is likely to be especially serious. And once again we find that the principles of fire and water, *agni* and *soma* are used to classify these points. After distinguishing between lethal points damage to which kills immediately and those which cause a lingering death, the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* says:

Those [lethal points] which kill immediately are of the essence of *agni*; for when the qualities of *agni* are rapidly reduced, they cause destruction. Those [lethal points] which kill after an interval are of the essence both *agni* and of *soma*; although the qualities of *agni* are rapidly reduced, the qualities of *soma* are reduced by degrees, so destruction occurs after an interval of time³⁶.

Vāgbhaṭa and the Wheel of Time

The doctrine of *Agni* and *Soma*, the ancient Vedic idea of the fundamental polarity of fire and water, sun and moon, drying and

³⁵ Ah.śā. 4.37-38 (KUMṬE *et al.* 1995, p. 413): *viśamaṃ spandanam yatra pīḍite ruk ca marma tat* || 37cd
māṃsāsthināyudhamanīrā sandhisamāgamaḥ syān marmeti ca tenātra sutarāṃ jīvitamsthitam || 38 ||
bāhulyena tu nirdeśaḥ śoḍhaivaṃ marmakalpanā prāṇāyatanaśāntāyādaikyam vā marmanāṃ matam || 39 ||.

³⁶ Su.śā. 6.16 (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 371): *tatra sadhyaḥprāṇaharāṇy āgneyāni, agniḡṇeṣv āśu kṣīneṣu kṣapayanti; kālāntaraprāṇaharāṇi saumyāgneyāni, agniḡṇeṣv āśu kṣīneṣu kramena ca somagṇeṣu kālāntareṇa kṣapayanti...* || 16 ||. These qualities of the *marmans* are also discussed by RAMACHANDRA RAO and SUDARSHAN 1985-1987, II, p. 119.

moistening, is used in Vāgbhaṭa's *Aṣṭāṅgahrdayasaṃhitā* as part of a classification of the year into two contrasting periods of "outpouring" and "absorption". Vāgbhaṭa is summarizing and formalizing the teachings of the *Suśrutasamhitā* and the *Carakasamhitā*³⁷. This cyclic concept of the years rolling by is interestingly described in the *Suśrutasamhitā*, where it is named the Wheel of Time, or *kālacakra*.

Now then, two halves of the year together make a year. Five of those are technically termed a *yuga*. Time, from the fraction of a second right up to a *yuga*, rolling along like a wheel, is called the "Wheel of Time" by some people³⁸.

In this Wheel of Time, the "absorptive" half of the year is the part of the year during which the ecliptic moves towards the north. The sun is high in the sky, the weather is dominated by heat. It is described as follows:

The three seasons starting with the cool season should be known as the Northern Path. And this is the Taker, because day by day it takes for itself a man's strength. For in that period the nature of that Path makes the sun and the winds so bitter, hot, and dry that they destroy the gentle, moist, cooling principle of the earth.

The savours bitter, astringent, and pungent are, in sequence, ascendant. That is why the Taker is of the nature of fire³⁹.

In contrast to this, the "replenishing" half of the year, dominated by fluid values, with the sun casting longer shadows as the ecliptic falls lower in the sky, is described thus:

The Southern Path, starting with the monsoon, is called the Releaser, since it releases strength. The moon is in the ascendant at this time, because it is of the nature of Soma. The sun is driven away.

³⁷ The relevant sources are Su.sū. 6 and Ca.sū. 6.

³⁸ Su.sū. 6.9: *atha khalv ayane dve yugapat saṃvatsaro bhavati te tu pañca yugam iti saṃjñāṃ labhante sa eṣa nimeṣādīr yugaparyantaḥ kālāś cakravatparivartamānaḥ kālacakram ity ucyata ityeke 9 ||*.

³⁹ Ah.sū. 3.2-4c (KUMṬE *et al.* 1995, p. 37 f.): *śiśirādyās tribhis tais tu vidyād ayanam uttaramādānaṃ ca, tad ādatte nṛṇāṃ pratidinaṃ balam 2 tasmin hy atyarthatikṣṇoṣṇarūḁsā mārgasvabhāvataḥ ādityapavanāḥ saumyān kṣapayanti guṇān bhuvah 3 tiktah kaṣāyah kaṭuko balino 'tra rasāḥ kramāt tasmād ādānam āgneyam ...*

While the surface of the earth has its warmth soothed away by the cool clouds, rain, and wind, the gentle savours, sour, salt, and sweet, are in the ascendant⁴⁰.

During the colder part of the year, a person's inner reserves of heat rise to meet the challenge.

Strength is at its peak during the cold seasons, and is but slight during the rains and the summer. During the other two it is medium. The digestive fire of a strong man is powerful during winter, because it is challenged by the cold. When fanned by the wind, and having little fuel, it may cook the body tissues. So in the winter one should make use of sweet, sour, and salty savours⁴¹.

Thus, the rhythm of heat and cold in the environment, due to the cyclic dominance of *agni* and *soma*, affects the balance of heat and cold in each person. This in turn governs the foods they should eat, which are chosen to avoid the build up of excess. A system of checks and balances exists through which a person maintains equilibrium with their environment.

Vāgbhaṭa refers to the "soma-ness" of the earth, an adjective that we now know captures a wide semantic field relating to cool, moist, soothing, vegetative, and lunar values, in fundamental contrast to the fiery or solar. He is here using the same essential opposition between sun and moon, hot and cold, the basic tenet of Indian medicine that the whole world can be viewed as a system of oppositions between the fire of Agni and the coolness of Soma.

These seasonal polarities are lived even in the present. To give one example, in the performance of the traditional Keralan Mudiattu, which is simultaneously a participatory dance drama and smallpox preventative, the seasonal changes of the goddess are characterised as follows:

The earth goddess in the season of Meenam [March-April] is a virgin – infertile, menstrual, hot, desirous, and angry ... ; in Kanni [September-

⁴⁰ Ah.sū. 3.4d-6 (KUMṬE *et al.* 1995, p. 38-40 f.): *ṛtavo dakṣiṇāyanam 4 varṣādayo visargaś ca yadvalaṃ viṣṛjaty ayam saumyatvād atra somo hi balavān hiyate raviḥ 5 meghavrṣṭyanilaiḥ śītaiḥ śāntatāpe mahītale snigdhaś cehāmlalavaṇamadhurā balino rasāḥ 6.*

⁴¹ Ah.sū. 3.7-8 (KUMṬE *et al.* 1995, p. 38-40 f.): *śīte 'grya vrṣṭigharme 'lpa balaṃ madhyaṃ tu śeṣayoh balinaḥ śītasamrodhād dhemante prabalo 'nalaḥ 7 bhavaty alpendhano dhātūn sa paced vāyuner itaḥ ato hime 'smin seveta svādvamlalavaṇān rasān 8.*

October], she is an erotic wife, wet, cool, and fertile, impregnated by continual infusions of semen These two seasonal poles of the year ... reflect the continuous cycle of life and death in the landscape of the goddess. In the Dravidian world view, neither pole can exist without the other⁴².

Śārṅgadhara

This dichotomy is not restricted to ancient texts. It is also explicitly used, for example, by the influential fourteenth-century author Śārṅgadhara⁴³. This author uses the *agni/soma* polarity in his classification of mountains into two fundamental types:

Mountains like the Vindhyas are judged to be of the fiery principle (*āgneya*), while mountains such as the Himalayas are of the cooling principle (*saumya*). The medical herbs that come from them have qualities corresponding to their origins. Such herbs also grow in other woods and gardens too, of course⁴⁴.

Thus, for Śārṅgadhara, the fiery or watery quality of the mountain range is transmitted to the medicinal herbs which grow on them.

The same author also refers to *agni* and *soma* in his discussion of the energizing principle of the body (*ojas*).

Energy (*ojas*) is present throughout the whole body, and is thought to be cold, oily, and solid. It is of the cooling principle (*saumya*), and is believed to give the body its power and nourishment.

So even in the latest periods of āyurvedic literary creativity, the basic distinction of the world according to the typology of *agni* and *soma* types was active and strongly felt.

⁴² CALDWELL 1995, p. 363 cited by ZARRILLI 1998, n. 83.

⁴³ On this author, see WUJASTYK 2003, ch. 7, and *HIML*: IIA, p. 196-207 et *passim*.

⁴⁴ *Śārṅgadharaśaṃhitā* 1.1.55: (ŚĀSTRĪ 1931): *dravyeṣu sthānabhedena guṇa-bhedah āgneyā vindhyaśailādyaḥ saumyo himagirir mataḥ atas tadauśadhāni syur anurūpāni hetubhiḥ anyeṣv api prarohanti vaneṣūpavaneṣu ca* || 55 ||. This verse is repeated by the influential sixteenth century Benares author Bhāvamiśra (*Bhāvaprakāśa, pūrvakhaṇḍa, miśraprakaraṇa* [6], v. 93). On Bhāvamiśra, see *HIML*, vol. IIA, p. 239-46 et *passim*.

Beyond medicine

There is considerable further evidence to be gathered of the wider use of the Agni/Soma scheme in other branches of Indian literature. WHITE (1997) has shown that in Siddha and Vidyādhara traditions the sun and the moon are used symbolically in a great variety of contexts, but usually in a manner which follows the basic āyurvedic opposition of forces. There are also conscious inversions, for example when the potencies of semen (*soma*, water, mercury) and sulphur (*agni*, fire, menstrual blood) have reversed polarity (*ibid.*, p. 75). Haṭhayoga and tantric texts describe the sun and the moon as embodied in the *īḍā* and *piṅgalā* channels in the spine (WHITE 1997, p. 77). The epics and purāṇas provide a rich field for further investigations of this principle.

Ethnographic Evidence

The idea that foods and other ingestible substances are classified as hot or cold is, of course, familiar to anthropologists and ethnographers, and there is a distinguished scholarly literature on this topic. The paper on popular uses of hot and cold concepts in illness management in some North African communities (Kel Tamasheq, Mali) by RANDALL (1993), for example, gives a good survey of previous anthropological work on this topic.

Several authors have written insightfully on this topic in the context of South Asia. DANIEL (1984, ch. 5) has explored the hot/cold divide as experienced by Tamils, drawing attention to hot and cold foods, persons, humours, qualities (Skt. *guṇas*, Tam. *kuṇams*), processes, and colours. MCGILVRAY 1998 has provided striking visual images of similar hot/cold categories of gender, health, and worship in Tamil country and Sri Lanka. The hot/cold polarity is represented in the performance space of traditional Keralan dance-drama:

The NE ... represents the peak of the hot, dry season The SW ... corner, epitomizes the cool, dry, fertile energies of life ...⁴⁵

MORENO and MARRIOTT 1990, as part of a project to rethink the interpretation of Indian ethnography using indigenous categories, have also found the hot/cold dichotomy to be central to the understanding of many issues. They draw explicit parallels between medical humours (breath, bile, phlegm), the physical elements (wind, fire, water), and other

⁴⁵ CALDWELL 1995, p. 330, cited by ZARRILLI 1998, n. 83.

Indian categories. But in spite of their discussion of tripartite schemes, the evidence they present in their ethnographic descriptions of South Indian festivals shows clearly that the fundamental division actually experienced by their informants is a warm/cool one⁴⁶.

URAGODA (1987, p. 16-17) describes how many people in Sri Lanka divide foods into “heaty” or “hot” and “cooling” or “cold”. This belief is especially pronounced during times of illness, when it is escalated to provide a total therapeutic dietary regime. Uragoda notes that the practice is known throughout other SEA countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Burma, and Thailand, and even in S. America, and that although the belief system is similar in all cases, there is widespread inconsistency as to the actual details of which foods are heaty and which are cool.

Ancient Greece

In the earliest traditions of humoralism in Greek medicine in the sixth- and fifth-century BC, Nutton has pointed out that pre-Socratic philosophers such as Heraclitus of Ephesus (ca. 540-475 BC) posited a perpetual strife between two basic principles, fire and water (NUTTON 1993, p. 281). This doctrine of bipolar conflict was also associated with the philosopher Alcmaeon of Croton (fl. ca. 480-440 BC), who was cited by Aristotle as speaking of “oppositions ... i.e., white-black, sweet-bitter, good-bad, large-small” (GUTHRIE 1962-1981, I, p. 341-59).

Many interesting medical ideas from ancient Greece are to be found in the *Anonymus Londinensis*, an anonymous medical papyrus held in the British Museum, dated to the 2nd century AD (JONES 1947, p. ix), but containing earlier views. Amongst the most important disease-concepts discussed in the *Anonymus Londinensis* is that of *perittōma*, a residue of undigested food which can poison the body and lead to serious illness. This is exactly parallel to the early Indian idea of *āma*, or raw undigested matter which is considered equally dangerous in the āyurvedic system of medicine. STEUER and SAUNDERS (1959, p. 29) discuss the relationship between Greek and Egyptian ideas of this concept. In the course of this discussion, they note the close association of notions of *perittōma* with early concepts of phlegm and bile in the *Anonymus Londinensis*, especially as propounded by one Dexippus the Coan⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ NICHTER 1987 too has dealt with these issues.

⁴⁷ JONES 1947, p. 55. The *Anonymus Londinensis* purports to give the early doctrines of a non-Hippocratic school of medicine associated with Cnidus. The validity of assuming a hard distinction between Cnidian and Coan “schools” of medicine has been discussed by LONIE 1978.

Dexippus speaks of the “*dynamis*” of phlegm and bile, “evidently meaning the putrefactive *dynamis* attributed to *perittōma* by Aristotle” (STEUER and SAUNDERS 1959, p. 30). The humours are seen as originating from indigestion. Here we have evidence of an early Greek discourse concerning humours in which only the bile and phlegm were implicated. Elsewhere too, the *Anonymus Londinensis* refers to this idea, e.g., “there is a popular view that diseases result from the conflict of two opposites – heat and moisture – in our bodies”⁴⁸.

It is not only in the pre-Hippocratic traditions that water and fire can be seen as the primary humoral entities. KIRFEL (1951, ch. 7) has shown that a number of Hippocratic treatises give primacy to bile and phlegm (i.e., the incarnations of fire and water) as the causes of disease.

Three Humours or Two?

KIRFEL (1951) presents a series of short, connected studies in which he develops the idea that historically speaking, the most fundamental medical doctrine in India was one in which two humours were posited, rather than three. Citing especially the work of WECK, KIRFEL (1951, ch. 4) points to the medical traditions of Bali, which retain archaic features of ancient Indian thought, and where human pathology is understood as a disturbance of the elements of fire and water in the body.

Kirfel continues with a discussion of the evidence from classical Indian medical texts for an old water-fire humoral duality. In this context he discusses the āyurvedic terminology for the lungs. It has often been noted that in Āyurveda the two lungs are not treated anatomically equivalent organs. The right and left lungs have different names and functions. The right lung is called *kloman*, and the left (or sometimes both) is called *phupphusa*.

From the pure parts of blood and fatty tissue arise the kidneys, from the pure parts of muscles, blood, phlegm and fatty tissue arise the testicles, from the pure parts of blood and phlegm comes the heart. The heart is the basis of the pipes that carry breath. Below and to the left of it are the spleen and *phupphusa*-lung, to the right of it are the liver and the *kloman*-

⁴⁸ JONES 1947, p. 49. Cf. also *ibid.*, 41, 53, 91, 117 (sea and sun). It is also tempting to see in the Greek concept of “*dynamis*” a parallel with the Indian “potency” which, as we have seen, is also expressed through the forces of heat and cold.

lung. It is especially the seat of consciousness. So when it is covered by darkness (*tamas*), all creatures go to sleep⁴⁹.

Kirfel describes how the right lung is seen as a reservoir of water, and argues that there is a coincidence of the values of left-water-feminine in āyurvedic accounts of the body⁵⁰.

I have elsewhere argued on the basis of a reading of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* on breath and wind that there is a categorical difference between humoral wind on the one side, and bile and phlegm on the other⁵¹. Wind is praised in extravagant terms, being equated even with God.

This holy wind is God, they say. It is free, eternal, and omnipresent, and because of this it is revered in all the worlds as the Self of all creatures. It is the cause of the existence, origination, and disappearance of all beings⁵².

Elsewhere, wind is privileged as the motive force behind all movements in the body, and in particular it has power over the other two humours, bile and phlegm, the humoral forms of fire and water. As late as the fourteenth century, Śārṅgadhara says:

Choler is lame, phlegm is lame, the impurities and body tissues are lame. Where the wind leads, they follow, just like clouds. The wind is considered the most powerful amongst them because it apportions things⁵³.

⁴⁹ Su.śā. 4.31 (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 358): *raktamedahprasādād vṛkkau; māṃsārkkaphamedah prasādād vṛṣanau; śonitakaphaprasādajam hṛdayam, yadāśrayā hi dhamanyaḥ prānavahāḥ; tasyādho vāmataḥ plihā phupphusaś ca, dakṣiṇato yakṛt kloma ca; tad viśeṣeṇa cetanāsthānam, atas tasmimś tamasā vṛte sarvaprāṇinaḥ svapanti* 31 ||.

⁵⁰ KIRFEL 1951, p. 20 f.

⁵¹ WUJASTYK 2003, intro. to ch. 3. ZYSK 1993 gives a survey of the history of the Indian concept of wind/breath. FILLIOZAT 1964, ch. 7, compares Indian concepts of wind/breath with those found in the Greek Hippocratic writings.

⁵² Su.nī. 1.5-7b (TRIKAMJI ĀCĀRYA 1992, p. 257): *svayambhūr eṣa bhagavān vāyur ity abhiśabditaḥ* 5 || *svātantryān nityabhāvāc ca sarvagatvāt tathaiva ca sarveṣāṃ eva sarvātmā sarvalokanamaskṛtaḥ* 6 || *sthityutpattivinaśeṣu bhūtānāṃ eṣa kāraṇam.*

⁵³ Śārṅgadharaṣaṃhitā 1.5.25: (ŚĀSTRĪ 1931): *pittaṃ paṅgu kaphaḥ paṅguh paṅgavo maladhātavaḥ vāyunā yatra nīyante tatra gacchanti meghavat* 25 || *pavanas teṣu balavān vibhāgakaraṇān mataḥ.* There is a possibility that parts of this passage are interpolations, but the ideas they express are nevertheless typical.

Or, as the sixteenth-century author Bhāvamiśra has it,

When joined with heat (*tejas*) it warms; when joined with *soma*, it cools.
Wind, because it apportions things, is the chief of the humours⁵⁴.

These passages show that there exists an asymmetry in the āyurvedic humoral system. Wind, *vāta*, is said to have primacy over cholera (fire) and phlegm (water). Wind may join with either of the other humours, but they may not join with each other. The *tridoṣa* theory is not present in the earliest Vedic literature of India. But the binary opposition of Agni and Soma is as old as the oldest Indian evidence we have. The Agni/Soma duality is carried forward explicitly into āyurvedic literature, and becomes the prototype of all hot/cold oppositions, including those of the humours bile and phlegm. It seems possible, then, that the combination of wind with the hot/cold humours is a specifically Indian, and specifically post-Vedic, contribution. Perhaps the emphatic character of the remarks about wind cited above from the *Suśrutasamhitā* may indicate that wind was a relatively new entrant as a humoral category, and that its case required vigorous presentation. The evidence could be considered to demonstrate that the *tridoṣa* or three-humour theory of classical Indian medicine is really a two-plus-one theory, wind being added to a more tightly-bound and more ancient duality of cholera and phlegm, fire and water, Agni and Soma.

This Indian medical duality is parallel to the same duality reported in Greek sources such as the *Anonymus Londinensis*, the Hippocratic authors and by Galen, where it is as being a feature of the tradition perhaps associated with Cnidus in south-western Anatolia. Could the Cnidian and āyurvedic hot/cold humoral dualities form part of a common Indo-European heritage?

Alternatively, perhaps both cultures borrowed these concepts from a common Indo-Iranian source. PUHVEL (1999) argued that the Indo-European medicine postulated by Darmesteter and Benveniste (BENVENISTE 1945), based on the threefold division of magic, herbs, and surgery, was not Indo-European at all, but rather Indo-Iranian, and was borrowed by the Greeks (down to Hippocrates and Plato) from Indo-Iranian sources (cf. EMMERICK 1993). Then Greek innovations took over and Greek medical lore developed independently. A study of the earliest Indo-Iranian traditions might throw light on whether a similar argument could be made for the categories discussed in the present essay.

⁵⁴ *Bhāvaprakāśa, pūrvakhaṇḍa, garbhaprakaraṇa* (3), v. 106: *dāhakṛt tejasā yuktaḥ śītakṛt somasamśrayāt vibhāgakaraṇād vāyuḥ pradhānam doṣasamgrāhe*
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Conclusions

I wish to draw three conclusions from the above reflections, one certain and two conjectural.

The certain conclusion concerns the fundamental importance of the *agni/soma* polarity as a conscious organising principle for understanding the relationships of many categories of the world. This polarity is a clear theme in the āyurvedic literature and beyond. It can be traced backwards to the very earliest layer of Indian thought in the Vedas, and forward to the present in the widespread contemporary custom of classifying foods and medicines as expressing heating or cooling powers.

The first conjecture is that the Agni/Soma polarity expressed itself as a two-humour fire-water medical theory that is older than the classical three humour doctrine in Āyurveda. I have also referred very briefly to the fact that in the earliest Greek medical tradition a similar doctrine of hot/cold polarity was, for a period at least, proposed as the principle explanation for disease. The second conjecture is that the Indian and Greek two-humour theories may have a common origin, either Indo-European or possibly Indo-Iranian.

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