

# Prakrti: Assessing Your Ayurvedic Constitution

## What is *prakrti*?

Literally the word means “nature” or “energy/matter principle” of creation. In this context; however, it refers to one’s innate individual constitution, expressed as the inborn ratio of the three *doshas* (*vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*).

## How do three *doshas* produce so many different body-mind characteristics?

Once we know and understand the qualities of the three *doshas*, we begin to see all of the ways that that *dosha* expresses itself in the structures of the body, in the physiology, and in the mental and emotional makeup.

For example, *vata* is said to be cold, dry, rough, light, expansive, empty, subtle, moving, and changeable. In one person this *vata* nature expresses itself as a tendency to dry skin, cracking joints, and constipation; in another person as quick comprehension and mental spaciness; in another as thin or short stature; in yet another as empathy, creativity, and emotionality.

Similarly *pitta*, whose qualities are hot, sharp, oily, and penetrating, expresses in one person in the form of soft, warm, oily skin; in another person as a sharp intellect; in another as a drive for achievement, in yet another as voracious appetite and high metabolism.

The qualities of *kapha* are described as heavy, cool, wet, inert, stable, and retentive. So in various ways, this *dosha* may manifest as slow metabolism, or excellent memory and organizational skills, or a fully developed body, or as a calm and dignified demeanor.

## How is *Prakrti* formed?

Although there exist more complex explanations of *prakrti*, the simplest and most widely accepted explanation is this: *Prakrti* is established at conception. It is a product of 1) the genetic inheritance of the two parents contained in the fertilized egg, and 2) the *samskaras* (mental, occupational, emotional, etc., tendencies) of the incarnating being, who becomes progressively more identified with the developing fetus as the pregnancy progresses. The *prakrti*, or energetics, which underlies the body-mind complex gives rise to features which allow for expression of that person’s *samskaras* for this lifetime.

## Why is it useful to know one’s *Prakrti*?

Knowing *prakrti* is a wonderful tool for understanding oneself and others, and it also aids a person in making appropriate dietary and lifestyle choices for maintaining one’s health. From a practitioner’s standpoint, it is one part of the information used in the selection of medicines and other therapies for a particular patient, as well as in selecting appropriate dosages of

these. In recommending therapies, the practitioner will also want to know the degree to which the observed habits and tendencies of the patient represent an expression of that person's *prakrti* (as opposed to representing *vikrti*, or imbalance.)

### **How do we Assess *Prakrti*?**

My main Ayurvedic teacher, Professor R.P. Trivedi, wisely pointed out that when we first see a patient, we get an approximate *prakrti* only--- *prakrti* is really an object for self-inquiry. In a sense we are looking at the most stable features of the physical body-mind complex, and those mental tendencies which are most internal to the being. Using these along with stable patterns of physiology persisting throughout the life, we try to look back through time to deduce the *prakrti*. Since part of *prakrti* is genetically inherited, we may also benefit from knowing something about the person's parents and their medical history.

Generally the Ayurvedic practitioner makes physical observations of the person (skin color, bone structure, how the person moves, the manner and content of speech, etc.) and asks diagnostic questions about jobs and hobbies, mental and emotional tendencies, physiology, dreams, etc. This is the most accurate way of determining *prakrti* on a short-term basis.

### **Prakrti Charts and Pulse Reading**

The classical eighteen tables of Ayurveda were developed as an aid for the practitioner in assessing the *prakrti* of their students or patients; however, they are not user-friendly and do not provide an easy method of computation. Therefore, some Ayurvedic practitioners give their patients and students "*prakrti* charts" to fill out. These are various shortened and more user-friendly versions of the classical tables, which they construct themselves or borrow from other practitioners. However, such charts, including ones I have experimented with constructing myself, are rarely as accurate as a practitioner's assessment based on questioning and observation, or a person's deep study of themselves and their life history over a period of several months.

Some schools of Ayurveda claim that *prakrti* can be determined from reading the pulse, while other schools claim that pulse diagnosis aids only in the assessment of *vikrti*, and cannot, in most cases, be reliably used to assess *prakrti*. Since I have observed people who are excellent pulse readers tell a student, for example, one year "Your *prakrti* is V2P3K1" and the next year tell the same person "Your *prakrti* is V3P2K1," I, too, believe that pulse reading cannot, in most cases, be relied upon to assess *prakrti*.

I suspect that the use of pulse-reading or charts alone, in an attempt to quickly assess *prakrti*, is responsible for the unfortunate truth of the wry joke "Want to change your *prakrti*? See a different practitioner!"

### **How do I Use the Accompanying *Prakrti* Features List for Assessing my *Prakrti*?**

- Try to consider the items in the following lists over the long view of your whole life, rather than simply how they apply in the near-present. If one pattern persisted for a long time, and then a second pattern emerged, and also persisted for a long time, ask yourself which one felt more innately natural to your own being.
- Ask yourself to what degree each feature listed describes you:
  - 1) Not really applicable? This indicates a low level of the *dosha* in that trait.
  - 2) Describes you to some degree, some of the time? Indicates a moderate level of the *dosha* regarding that trait.
  - 3) Fits you well, most of the time? Indicates a high level of that *dosha* regarding that trait.

Use the list of features below as a good start on understanding of how the three *doshas* are patterned within your own being. Remember that everyone has some characteristics of each *dosha* ---what we are trying to assess is the relative ratio of the three *doshas* within a particular person. It is hardest to determine *prakrti* accurately when the amounts of each *dosha* in an individual person are close together.

## I. *VATA* Characteristics

### **Stature**

- shorter or taller than average
- unusually proportioned in body or face
- slender and small-boned
- hard, thin, or wiry musculature
- difficulty gaining weight
- secondary sexual characteristics not markedly developed  
(smaller buttocks and breasts in women; in men, chest and beard less full)

### **Facial Features, Skin, and Hair**

- complexion dark relative to ancestral group.
- facial features are either irregular or very delicate and refined
- hair is rough, dry, breaks or falls out easily, or is very curly
- skin, throat, and eyes tend to be dry
- scanty perspiration.

### **Movement, Speech, and Activity**

- lots of nervous energy and often fidgets when sitting
- joints often crack when moving.
- tends to move and eat quickly
- talks rapidly and animatedly, often uses hand gestures
- in conversation interrupts others—already senses what they are going to say
- enjoys movement-related activities (hiking, yoga, skiing bicycling, dancing, etc)

- easily distracted; difficulty completing tasks
- difficulty being on time

### **Physiology**

- appetite is erratic and elimination 1-2 X/day with tendency to constipation
- energy level fluctuates
- often feels chilly; dislikes windy, cold, and dry climates
- feels best in sunny, warm, moist climates
- sleep patterns are often disturbed or irregular
- frequent dreams of levitation, flying, floating, or fleeing
- among blood relatives, skeletal, nervous system, and mental/ emotional disorders are common

### **Food Preferences**

- not usually attracted to cold foods or raw foods;
- prefers warm, soupy meals, and rich creamy foods with flavorful sauces
- attracted to sweet foods
- likes salty and sour tastes
- attracted to dairy products, butter/ nut butters or other oils
- when left to oneself, tendency to snack and graze rather than taking the time to prepare a meal

### **Emotional Make-up**

- naturally expressive, difficult to hide emotions
- In difficult situations, tends to feel overwhelmed
- when emotionally imbalanced, tends to worry; feels anxious, nervous, or insecure
- when balanced, enthusiastic and vivacious; empathic and sensitive, likes emotional intimacy
- quick to like and dislike, quick to make decisions

### **Mental Qualities and Occupational Tendencies**

- creatively talented, likes to do artwork, theater, music, singing, graphic design, advertising, creative writing, etc.
- or works in service industry or construction, or as a spiritual teacher, teacher, healer, or psychic
- understands theoretical things quickly, but memory is not the best.
- has many interests, focusing on one thing is sometimes difficult
- spiritually and psychically attuned, but less well grounded in the physical world compared to others
- finances often a challenge

## **II. *PITTA* Characteristics**

**Stature**

- medium height with medium build, well-proportioned
- well-muscled
- can gain weight in middle age

**Facial Features, Skin, and Hair**

- skin soft, oily, warm to the touch, bruises easily
- skin has reddish, yellowish, or coppery cast; hair has reddish tints
- hair is straight, fine, thin, and tends to be oily.
- eyes have an intense expression, and are greenish, hazel, reddish-brown, amber, or gray

**Movement, Speech, and Activity**

- walks with determined gait
- enjoys competitive sports
- hard-working, ambitious, organized, achievement-oriented
- inspirational speaker, can talk for a long time
- communication style is often aggressive or argumentative.
- good leader; can be intensely committed professionally, politically, or spiritually
- obsessive about punctuality

**Physiology**

- high metabolism
- digestion is fairly rapid, evacuation tends towards loose stools, often twice per day
- dislikes heat and hot climates; feels better in cool climates and when near bodies of water
- perspires easily
- overly sensitive to bright light
- tendency toward inflammatory conditions and acidity
- among older blood relatives, hyperacidity, heart disease, high blood pressure, and early greying are common
- strong appetite, and gets irritable if meals are delayed
- sleeps soundly, 6-7 hours;
- often dreams of violence, adventure, problem-solving, or bright colors

**Food Preferences**

- attracted to sweets,
- likes bitter and astringent tastes (as in coffee, beer, white wine, chocolate)
- hot spices, acidic foods, and hot drinks can aggravate the mouth or digestion.
- likes dairy products, grains, and soft, creamy, mild foods.
- likes raw foods, such as fruits and salads.
- frequent intake of liquids

**Emotional Make-up**

- when emotionally imbalanced, tends towards impatience, frustration,

irritability, anger

- when balanced, assertive, courageous, inspirational, reasonable, protective
- after expressing anger, calms down quickly
- in difficult situations, tries to take control
- emotional intimacy can be challenging
- in situations of injustice, fights back.
- perfectionist; overly critical of self and others
- likes to overcome obstacles and solve problems.

### **Mental Qualities and Occupational Tendencies**

- logical and analytical process well-developed
- quick to make decisions, usually with good result
- highly educated, one or more university degrees
- research- oriented or academic career
- career in mathematics, science, computer science, social sciences, or medicine
- works as an entrepreneur, attorney, in law-enforcement, or military
- usually enjoys adequate income

## III. *KAPHA* Characteristics

### **Stature**

- robust, well-developed musculature and joints, large-boned
- taller than average
- well-developed secondary sexual characteristics
- tends to gain weight easily throughout life
- facial and body features are rounded

### **Facial Features, Skin, and Hair:**

- moist skin
- whitish complexion, relative to ancestral background
- large, attractive eyes
- hair thick and lustrous, sometimes wavy, with abundant body hair
- hair is very dark or pale, lacking reddish pigment

### **Movement, Speech, and Activity**

- usually walks slowly and gracefully
- dignified in speech and bearing
- often not very talkative
- listens attentively to others, but keeps own counsel
- slow to change
- physical activity often does not appeal, even though it is healthy
- slow to initiate action, but completes what is started

- enjoys doing volunteer work, and takes satisfaction in helping others
- enjoys practical activities and working with hands
- stable and supportive family life; devoted to family, loyal to friends.

### **Physiological and Metabolic Features**

- slow metabolism
- tendency to retain water and produce excess mucous
- can bear hunger and thirst easily.
- digestion and evacuation slow; evacuate usually once per day
- usually early to bed and early to rise, sleeps well, needs 8-9 hours of sleep
- frequent dreams of bodies of water
- among blood relatives, larger-than-average family sizes and long life spans are common.
- among older blood relatives, diabetes, asthma, and congestive heart disease are common
- dislikes humid, cloudy weather; feels best on warm, sunny, dry days

### **Food Preferences**

- not particularly attracted to sweets, dairy products, fruits, oil, or heavy, bland foods
- dislikes cold food
- prefers well-spiced, substantial, warm meals and hot drinks.

### **Emotional Make-up**

- tendency to suppress emotions; overly complacent
- doesn't show emotions easily, and can be uncomfortable with emotional displays.
- emotionally stable; calm and unruffled in difficult situations.
- when emotionally imbalanced, feels sadness, longing, or depression
- when balanced, relaxed, calm, and humorous.

### **Mental Qualities and Occupational Tendencies**

- excellent memory
- organized and patient with details
- cares for others, teaches children, or religious vocation
- enjoys reading, languages, history
- career as arbiter, diplomat, judge, business owner, banker, or industrialist
- career or interests in farming, gardening, cooking, construction, decorating, architecture, or engineering
- material wealth seems to come easily

## **Prakriti Notation**

A person's Prakrti is named by the *dosha* or *doshas* that dominate in the constitution. The *samdosha* type is uncommon and indicates a *prakrti* where all three doshas are approximately equal. There are therefore seven *prakrti* types:

<i>Vata</i>	<i>Vata Pitta</i>	
<i>Pitta</i>	<i>Pitta Kapha</i>	<i>Samdosha (V2P2K2)</i>
<i>Kapha</i>	<i>Vata Kapha</i>	

Most Ayurvedic practitioners use a short-hand notation for *prakrti* which shows the strength and relative ratio of each *dosha* in the *prakrti*:

**V\_P\_K\_**

In the blanks following the letters V, P, and K, **a number between one and three** is inserted in each blank, and the numbers chosen can be fractions. Everybody has at least some of each *dosha*--without all three *doshas*, life cannot exist. Therefore, 1 is the lowest number which can be selected.

**3=intense level of that *dosha***

**2=moderate level of that *dosha***

**1=low level of that *dosha*.**

for example, V<sub>2</sub>1/2 P<sub>3</sub> K<sub>1</sub>1/2.; V<sub>2</sub>P<sub>3</sub>K<sub>2</sub>, V<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>K<sub>1</sub>, V<sub>1</sub>1/2 P<sub>2</sub> K<sub>2</sub>1/2, , etc.

**Dominance of a Single *Dosha*:**

- V<sub>2</sub>P<sub>3</sub>K<sub>2</sub>, and V<sub>2</sub>1/2 P<sub>3</sub> K<sub>1</sub>1/2, and V<sub>1</sub>P<sub>2</sub>K<sub>1</sub>, would all be classified as *pitta prakrtis* because *pitta* dominates in each one. However the level of intensity of the doshas is different in each of these people, and their secondary doshic dominance is also different.
- .V<sub>1</sub>P<sub>2</sub>K<sub>3</sub> and V<sub>1</sub>1/2 P<sub>1</sub> K<sub>2</sub>1/2 both represent, for example, *Kapha prakrtis*.
- V<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>K<sub>1</sub> and V<sub>2</sub>1/2 P<sub>1</sub> K<sub>1</sub>1/2 are both dominant in *Vata*.

**Dual Dosha Dominance:**

- V<sub>3</sub> P<sub>3</sub> K<sub>1</sub> and V<sub>2</sub> P<sub>2</sub> K<sub>1</sub> 1/2 would both be classified as *Vata Pitta*.
- V<sub>1</sub> P<sub>3</sub> K<sub>3</sub> and V<sub>1</sub>1/2 P<sub>2</sub> K<sub>2</sub> both represent *Pitta-Kapha prakrtis*.
- V<sub>2</sub>P<sub>1</sub>K<sub>2</sub> and V<sub>2</sub>3/4 P<sub>1</sub>1/2 K<sub>3</sub> would be regarded as *Vata- Kapha*, and *Kapha-Vata*, respectively.

From an Ayurvedic and spiritual perspective, the preferred *prakrti* type is the one which you possess. Departure from the ratio of *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha* in your own constitution is called *vikrti* (“false”).

and when these imbalances persist over a period of time, they can lead to disease. Thus, the Ayurvedic practitioner tries to assist you in “balancing your *doshas*”---using Ayurvedic and/or Hatha Yoga methods for returning the *doshas* to the **level and ratio** in which they exist in your *prakrti*.

However we can also see that different human societies are organized so as to have cultural preferences for different *prakrti* types-- India, for example, traditionally preferred *kapha*-dominated *praktis*, while contemporary North America prefers *pitta*. This cultural preference can make life easier or more difficult for a person, depending on whether or not one’s *prakrti* matches cultural expectations.