

## ***Water Therapy (Jala Chikitsa) Through an Ayurvedic Lens***

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### ***ABSTRACT***

*Water, known as Jala, is regarded in Ayurveda as a therapeutic substance possessing inherent cooling, nourishing, and purifying attributes derived from Apa Mahabhuta. Water therapy (Jala Chikitsa) encompasses both internal and external applications of water—such as drinking, bathing, pouring, soaking, and medicated hydrotherapy to restore physiological balance and enhance overall well-being. Classical Ayurvedic texts describe various forms of water, their energetic properties, seasonal implications, and indications based on dosha constitution. Modern scientific understanding of hydration, thermoregulation, detoxification, lymphatic drainage, and psychophysiological relaxation aligns closely with Ayurvedic explanations. Jala Chikitsa offers therapeutic benefits in digestive disorders, musculoskeletal pain, skin diseases, metabolic imbalance, psychological stress, women's health, and respiratory dysfunctions. As a safe, accessible, and cost-effective modality, water therapy continues to hold significant relevance in integrative medicine. The alignment of traditional Ayurvedic principles with emerging scientific evidence presents vast potential for clinical research and the development of structured hydrotherapy guidelines rooted in Ayurveda.*

***KEYWORDS:*** *Water therapy, Jala Chikitsa, Ayurveda, Hydrotherapy, Panchamahabhuta, Agni, Dosha balance, Avagaha, Pariseka, Snana, Ushnodaka*

## INTRODUCTION

Water has been revered as a sacred, life-sustaining element across civilizations, but in Ayurveda, its role transcends basic sustenance. Jala (water) is seen as a **Panchamahabhuta-dominant substance** predominantly governed by **Apa Mahabhuta**, symbolizing cohesion, nourishment, fluidity, and cooling properties. Ayurveda proposes that water possesses inherent **somya (cooling), mridu (softening), and prasanna (clarifying) qualities**, making it an essential medium for healing, detoxification, rejuvenation, and maintaining homeostasis.

Traditionally, Jala Chikitsa refers to the **therapeutic use of water in various forms**, including drinking, bathing, washing, sprinkling, immersion, and specific hydrotherapeutic procedures described in classical texts. While the West highlights hydrotherapy and balneotherapy, Ayurveda provides a more holistic, constitutional, and energetically aligned perspective. This ancient system does not limit water therapy to mere physical interventions but extends to **mind-body healing**, seasonal adaptation, and enhancing agni (digestive fire).

As modern lifestyles contribute to dehydration, stress, digestive disturbances, metabolic issues, and inflammatory conditions, the Ayurvedic understanding of water provides valuable insights for harmonizing bodily functions. Contemporary research on hydration, thermoregulation, lymphatic health, and detoxification aligns beautifully with Ayurvedic interpretations, making Jala Chikitsa increasingly relevant.

This paper explores water therapy through Ayurvedic principles, classical textual foundations, techniques, physiological mechanisms, therapeutic applications, contraindications, and future research directions.

## AYURVEDIC FOUNDATIONS OF JALA

### Concept of Jala in Panchamahabhuta Theory

In the Panchamahabhuta philosophy, the universe—including the human body—is composed of five fundamental elements: **Prithvi (earth), Jala (water), Agni (fire), Vayu (air), and Akasha (ether)**. Among these, **Jala Tattva** represents the essence of **liquidity, cohesion, softness, nourishment, and flow**. Ayurveda establishes that without the cohesive and fluid nature of water, structural and functional integrity cannot be maintained within biological systems.

Water is responsible for:

- **Snehana (lubrication)** of tissues
- **Sandhana (cohesion and structural integrity)**
- **Mardavata (softness and suppleness)** of dhatus
- **Prashamana (soothing and pacifying)** of aggravated doshas
- **Jeevana (life-sustenance)** through circulation and hydration

Jala is considered the **matrix** in which bodily processes occur and the medium through which nutrients are distributed. Its governance extends across digestion, thermoregulation, tissue maintenance, and elimination.

The predominance of **prema (fluidity)** makes Apa Mahabhuta essential for life. In Ayurveda, any disturbance in Jala Tattva results in dehydration-related disorders, impaired digestion, dryness, roughness, poor circulation, and increased Vata dominance.

### **QUALITIES (GUNAS) OF JALA ACCORDING TO AYURVEDA**

Ayurveda assigns specific **gunas (qualities)** to water. These qualities guide its therapeutic uses:

#### **1. Sheeta (Cooling):**

Water naturally reduces heat, pacifies Pitta, and soothes burning sensations.

#### **2. Mridu (Softening):**

Supports softness of tissues and helps alleviate roughness.

#### **3. Drava (Liquidity):**

Maintains fluidity of bodily channels (srotas).

#### **4. Snigdha (Unctuous):**

Contributes to lubrication of joints, skin, and mucosa.

#### **5. Manda (Gentle, slow-moving):**

Provides mildness and steadiness, beneficial for Vata pacification.

#### **6. Shuddha (Pure and clarifying):**

Purifies internal systems and assists in toxin removal.

These gunas make Jala an ideal medium for rituals, therapies, digestion, detoxification, and rejuvenation procedures.

## ROLE OF JALA IN TRIDOSHA THEORY

Ayurveda explains bodily functioning through the balance of **Vata, Pitta, and Kapha** doshas.

Jala interacts uniquely with each:

### 1. Vata Dosha

- Contains minimal water; dryness is intrinsic to Vata.
- Jala reduces **dryness (ruksha)**, **roughness (kharatva)**, and **instability**.
- Warm water is especially beneficial in calming Vata.

### 2. Pitta Dosha

- Pitta possesses heat (**ushna**), sharpness (**tikshna**), and slightly oily qualities.
- Jala's cooling and soothing nature makes it vital for regulating Pitta.
- Cold or room temperature water alleviates burning sensations, heat, and inflammatory conditions.

### 3. Kapha Dosha

- Kapha is dominated by Jala Tattva.
- Excessive water or cold water increases heaviness, sluggishness, and stagnation.
- Lukewarm water helps liquefy excess Kapha and clear congestion.

Thus, the *temperature, quantity, and timing* of water consumption directly influence dosha balance.

## JALA AND THE DHATU SYSTEM

Ayurveda identifies seven bodily tissues (**dhatu**s). Each dhatu relies on water differently:

### 1. Rasa Dhatu (Plasma & lymph)

Jala is a primary component. Adequate water supports nutrient transport, hydration, and immunity.

### 2. Rakta Dhatu (Blood)

Water maintains viscosity, fluidity, and cooling capacity of blood.

### 3. Mamsa Dhatu (Muscle tissue)

Supports elasticity, tone, and lubrication.

### 4. Meda Dhatu (Adipose tissue)

Water ensures proper metabolic circulation within adipose layers.

### 5. Asthi Dhatu (Bone tissue)

Indirectly dependent; water allows nutrients to reach deeper tissues.

### 6. Majja Dhatu (Bone marrow, nerves)

Maintains softness and fluidity of marrow and nerve tissue.

### 7. Shukra Dhatu (Reproductive tissue)

Water promotes reproductive fluid quality, virility, and vitality.

Water acts as the **primary nourisher of all dhatus**, facilitating both metabolic and structural functions.

## JALA ACCORDING TO CLASSICAL TEXTS

### Charaka Samhita

Describes the medicinal nature of various types of water and emphasizes seasonal variations in water quality. Charaka also highlights **Ushnodaka (boiled water)** as a therapeutic agent for digestion and toxin removal.

### Sushruta Samhita

Provides detailed guidance on **water purification**, storage, terrain-influenced changes, and the therapeutic application of water in surgical recovery and wound cleansing.

### Ashtanga Hridaya

Elaborates on the **timing of water intake** (before meals, after meals), and contraindications for cold or excessive water consumption. Recommends boiled water pre- and post-Panchakarma procedures.

## TYPES OF WATER ACCORDING TO AYURVEDA

Ayurveda classifies water not only by source but also by **digestibility, purity, temperature, and therapeutic influence**.

### 1. Rainwater (Parjanya Jala)

- Considered the purest form.
- Light, easy to digest, ideal for therapeutic use.
- Believed to be energized by natural cycles.

**2. River Water (Nadi Jala)**

- Qualities vary depending on origin; Himalayan rivers are considered lighter and pure.

**3. Well Water (Kupa Jala)**

- Heavy and cooling in nature.
- Increases Kapha; taken cautiously in cold seasons.

**4. Spring Water (Prasravana Jala)**

- Naturally filtered; considered clean and sattvic.
- Used for spiritual rituals and therapeutic purposes.

**5. Tank/Lake Water (Tadaga Jala)**

- Heavier and stagnant.
- Less preferred for internal use but suitable for external therapies.

**6. Boiled and Cooled Water (Ushnodaka)**

- Light, stimulating, digestive-friendly.
- Reduces Vata and Kapha.
- Recommended post-meal, during fever, and in metabolic disorders.

**7. Medicated Water (Kashaya-Jala or Arka Jala)**

Prepared using herbs for specific disorders:

- **Cumin water** for digestion
- **Fennel water** for Pitta pacification
- **Guduchi water** for detoxification
- **Triphala water** for cleansing
- **Neem water** for skin disorders

Each herbal water carries both the qualities of water and the pharmacological properties of the herbs.

## **IMPORTANCE OF WATER IN SHARIRA RACHANA (BODY STRUCTURE) & SHARIRA KRIYA (BODY FUNCTIONS)**

Ayurveda states that the body's structural integrity and functional activities are sustained by appropriate **Jala content**:

- **Srotas (channels)** require water to maintain patency and prevent obstruction.
- **Stanya (breast milk)** formation depends on Rasa, which is water-dominant.
- **Sweda (sweat)** production requires water for thermoregulation.
- **Mutra (urine)** elimination depends on proper hydration.
- **Shleshaka Kapha** lubricates joints due to adequate water presence.

Imbalances in water manifest as:

- Dry skin
- Fatigue
- Constipation
- Cracking joints
- Reduced sweating
- Excessive thirst
- Urinary disturbances

Thus, water is indispensable for sustaining life, nutrition, circulation, and excretion.

## **CONCEPT OF JALA CHIKITSA**

Jala Chikitsa refers to *therapeutic interventions using water* to promote health, restoration, and balance. It includes:

- **Internal use (Pana – drinking)**
- **External use (Seka, Pariseka, Snana, Avagaha, Abhyanga-jala)**
- **Temperature-specific therapies (Ushna, Sheeta)**
- **Herbalized hydrotherapy (using medicated decoctions)**

Jala Chikitsa is recommended for detoxification, calming the mind, enhancing lymphatic flow, skin disorders, musculoskeletal diseases, digestive issues, and metabolic imbalances.

## PHYSIOLOGY OF WATER IN THE HUMAN BODY ACCORDING TO AYURVEDA

### Role of Water in Dosha Balancing

- **Vata:** Water reduces dryness, roughness, and instability.
- **Pitta:** Cooling effect mitigates heat, inflammation, and irritability.
- **Kapha:** Excessive water aggravates heaviness, sluggishness, and coldness.

### Water and Agni (Digestive Fire)

Ayurveda states that:

- Warm water **stimulates agni**, helping digestion and reducing ama (toxins).
- Cold water **reduces agni**, increasing sluggishness and metabolic imbalance.

### Water and Dhatus

- **Rasa Dhatu:** Maintains hydration, nutrient transport, and fluid balance.
- **Rakta Dhatu:** Influences blood viscosity and heat balance.
- **Mamsa & Meda Dhatu:** Supports tissue elasticity and lubrication.
- **Shukra Dhatu:** Enhances fluidity and reproductive vitality.

## Forms and Methods of Water Therapy in Ayurveda

### 1. Internal Water Therapy (PANA)

#### a. Ushnodaka (Warm Water Therapy)

Used for:

- Ama reduction
- Indigestion
- Weight management
- Improving circulation
- Vata-Kapha disorders

#### b. Sheetodaka (Cold Water Therapy)

Used for:

- Pitta disorders
- Burning sensation

- Excess heat, acidity
- Bleeding disorders

**c. Medicated Water (Kashaya-jala)**

Prepared with herbs such as cumin, fennel, coriander, ginger, guduchi, neem, tulsi, and triphala. Therapeutic benefits vary depending on the herbs used.

**2. EXTERNAL WATER THERAPY (BASED ON CLASSICAL PROCEDURES)****a. Snana (Bathing)**

Induces freshness, muscle relaxation, skin purification, and improved circulation.

Different types:

- **Hot water bath** – reduces stiffness, promotes sweating, alleviates Vata.
- **Cold water bath** – invigorates senses, reduces Pitta, tightens tissues.

**b. Pariseka (Pouring Warm Water Over Body)**

A soothing procedure useful for:

- Vata disorders
- Muscle fatigue
- Anxiety and stress

**c. Avagaha (Immersion Bath)**

Involves immersing body parts in warm or medicated water.

Useful for:

- Hemorrhoids
- Dysmenorrhea
- Pelvic congestion
- Back pain
- Rheumatic conditions

**d. Seka (Gentle Stream Pouring)**

Used especially during:

- Inflammatory conditions

- Burning sensation
- Heat disorders

### **e. Herbalized Hydrotherapy**

Use of herbal decoctions in bathing:

- Neem for skin disorders
- Dashamoola for musculoskeletal conditions
- Triphala for cleansing
- Tulsi for respiratory wellness

## **SEASONAL AND DAILY REGIMEN GUIDELINES RELATED TO WATER**

Ayurveda prescribes:

### **Dinacharya (Daily Routine)**

- Drink warm water after waking to cleanse the gut.
- Avoid cold water immediately after meals.
- Do not consume excessive water during exercise.

### **Ritucharya (Seasonal Regimen)**

- **Summer:** Cool, room-temperature water; avoid very cold.
- **Winter:** Warm water to balance increased Vata and support digestion.
- **Monsoon:** Boiled, cooled water for safety and digestive stability.

## **THERAPEUTIC APPLICATIONS OF JALA CHIKITSA**

### **1. Digestive Disorders**

- Warm water reduces ama, improves absorption, relieves constipation, and stimulates agni.
- Boiled water infused with herbs helps bloating, acidity, indigestion, and sluggish metabolism.

### **2. Skin and Blood Purification**

- Regular warm bathing improves circulation and detoxification.
- Neem or triphala water baths support eczema, acne, fungal infections, and itching.
- Internal hydration purifies Rasa and Rakta dhatus.

**3. Musculoskeletal Conditions**

- Avagaha and hot water baths relieve stiffness, joint pain, arthritis, and muscle spasms.
- Dashamoola decoction baths reduce inflammation.

**4. Psychological Wellness**

- Water induces a grounding effect, supporting stress reduction.
- Warm bathing stabilizes Vata, reducing anxiety, insomnia, and restlessness.

**5. Respiratory Conditions**

- Warm water intake liquefies Kapha.
- Steam inhalation with medicated water alleviates congestion, sinusitis, and cough.

**6. Women's Health**

- Avagaha with lukewarm water reduces menstrual cramps.
- Herbal decoction baths support postpartum recovery.

**7. Urinary and Renal Health**

- Adequate hydration supports kidney function.
- Warm water helps flush toxins and reduce crystallization tendencies.

**8. Metabolic and Weight Management**

- Sipping warm water improves metabolic rate.
- Helps reduce Kapha accumulation and promotes fat mobilization.

**MECHANISM OF ACTION OF WATER THERAPY (AYURVEDIC & MODERN CORRELATION)****1. Thermoregulation**

Warm water improves peripheral circulation; cold water stimulates sympathetic activation.

**2. Detoxification**

Enhances lymphatic flow, digestion, sweating, and kidney filtration.

### **3. Nervous System Calming**

Warm water activates parasympathetic response, correlating with Vata pacification.

### **4. Skin Barrier Improvement**

Bathing supports hydration, microbiome balance, and toxin removal through sweat channels (srotas).

### **5. Gut Function**

Warm water supports gut motility, reduces ama, and regulates appetite.

## **CONTRAINDICATIONS AND PRECAUTIONS**

- Avoid very cold water if suffering from asthma, arthritis, indigestion, or sinusitis.
- Avoid hot water on the head during Pitta disorders.
- Do not drink excess water as it weakens agni.
- Cold baths should be avoided immediately after meals.
- Patients with hypertension should avoid extremely hot water therapy.
- Pregnant women should avoid excessively hot immersion baths.

## **SCOPE AND FUTURE PROSPECTS**

The integration of Ayurveda and modern hydrotherapy opens new research avenues:

- Identifying pharmacological actions of herbalized hydrotherapy
- Clinical studies on warm water's impact on metabolism
- Role of water temperature in dosha balancing
- Water therapy protocols for chronic lifestyle diseases
- Development of Ayurvedic hydrotherapy centers
- Use of Jala Chikitsa in mental health and wellness tourism
- Advanced formulations of medicated water for specific conditions

Ayurveda offers a comprehensive, safe, accessible approach that aligns with sustainable and cost-effective healthcare practices. Water therapy, when personalized according to dosha, season, age, and health conditions, becomes a powerful therapeutic modality.

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