

How to Use the Language of Qualities

Qualities are not simply properties to memorise. They are a vocabulary for recognising patterns in the world around us and in the effects that arise through our interaction with it.

The framework that follows provides a vocabulary of opposing qualities. The following principles explain how to use that vocabulary.

1. First ask: what am I describing?

- **A quality may describe a characteristic of a substance, object, environment, activity, or person as we perceive it.** A surface may feel rough, honey may feel sticky, or snow may feel cold. Here, the quality is being attributed to the thing itself, as apprehended through our senses.
- **A quality may also describe something that happens within the body or mind as a result of an interaction.** Here, the quality describes the response produced in the organism, rather than necessarily being a directly perceptible property of the thing itself. When I say that a chili is hot, it is not because it is hot to the touch, but because I experience heat when I eat it.

2. Then ask: with what am I comparing it with?

- **Describe one thing, compared with another.** We can compare two foods, two activities, two environments, or two people. This type of comparison is useful both for learning the language of qualities and for clinical reasoning—for example, when a practitioner needs to choose a plant with a particular degree of a quality, such as one that is mildly heating rather than very heating.
- **Describing a stable pattern.** Here, the comparison is not simply between two individuals. It is a comparison between an individual and an appropriate reference group—for example, a person may be described as lightly built if their build is lighter than what is typical in their community.
- **Describing change from a baseline.** Here, the comparison is between an individual's current state and their usual or healthy baseline—for example, a person's skin may be described as "dry" if it has become markedly dry, rough, or flaky compared with a well-hydrated baseline state.



Gurvādī Guṇas

A clinical working vocabulary of qualities

Ayurveda traditionally describes twenty qualities (gurvādī guṇas), arranged in ten opposing pairs. Classical sources differ somewhat in the exact ordering and terminology.

The first two pairs — Hot/Cold, Dry/Moist — are found across a number of traditional systems of medicine. The remaining pairs are more specific to Ayurveda. They provide greater precision, but can ultimately be related back to these two primary dimensions.

Pair	Sanskrit	Dimension	Comment
Hot / Cold	Uṣṇa / Śīta	Temperature	Hot can also describe the intensity of a process, such as strong digestion or the rushing of blood to the skin. Cold is the opposite in both senses.
Dry / Moist	Rūkṣa / Snigdha	Moisture	It can be useful to distinguish watery from oily moisture.
Light / Heavy	Laghu / Guru	Weight	
Sharp / Dull	Tīkṣṇa / Manda	Penetration	They are sometimes used to indicate fast / slow. Ultimately, they can be understood as measures of intensity.
Rough / Smooth	Khara / Ślakṣṇa	Continuity	They can also describe something as broken or deformed versus continuous and intact.
Unstable / Stable	Chala / Sthira	Regularity	They are sometimes also used to mean mobile / still.
Clear / Sticky	Viśada / Picchila	Obstruction	This relates particularly to the body's channels and whether material is passing through freely, or whether residue is obstructing them. At its extreme, clear can also take on the sense of empty or devoid of substance.
Subtle / Gross	Sūkṣma / Sthūla	Bulk	
Soft / Hard	Mṛdu / Kathina	Resistance	
Flowing / Dense	Drava / Sandra	Fluidity	This describes the capacity to flow and disperse versus remain compact

Important: the Sanskrit terms above are the closest traditional counterparts to the working English dimensions. They should not be read as implying that every modern English term is a perfect one-to-one translation of the classical Sanskrit quality.



Expanded vocabulary

Additional qualities I use

These additions can sit beside the classical ten pairs. Their value is not that they are more “correct,” but that they can make observations more specific and actionable.

Pair	Dimension	Comment
Mobile / Still	Motility	I prefer to distinguish this from Unstable/Stable. Something can be mobile but regular. This pair therefore describes movement itself, rather than variability over time. It can be complemented by information on direction of movement.
Tense / Lax	Tension	This overlaps to some extent with Hard / Soft, but I find it useful to separate the concept.
Fast / Slow	Speed	I prefer to distinguish this from Sharp / Dull to separate penetration from speed.
Pleasant / Unpleasant smell	Smell	Ācārya Suśruta includes this pair among qualities beyond the standard twenty. I find “unpleasant smell” useful in the clinical settings where it is clearly present.

Other terms describing state and quantity

These are not additional qualities. They are terms that help describe a clinical picture.

Pair	Dimension	Comment
Healthy / Vitiated	State	These describe the state or condition of a system rather than a quality itself. Relevant Ayurvedic terminology (such as Sāra / Duṣṭi) can be used here to describe the condition or state of a process or system.
Excessive / Insufficient	Quantity	These describe an increase or decrease in quantity or degree. In Ayurveda they are termed Vṛddhi / Kṣaya.
Acute / Chronic	Duration	This is a time dimension borrowed from Western medical language.

The **six tastes** — pungent, salty, sour, sweet, bitter and astringent — **colours**, and the **Doshas** — Vāta, Pitta and Kapha — are closely related to qualities, but they are not the same thing.

They are best understood as **related frameworks for describing and interpreting patterns in the body**, rather than as additional qualities themselves, and are beyond the scope of this guide.

