

## **The Science of Eating and Good Health**

India is the home not only of vegetarian cooking, but also of the science of healthful living. The scripture known as the Ayur-veda, is the oldest known work on biology, hygiene, medicine, and nutrition. This branch of the Vedas was revealed thousands of years ago by Sri Bhagavan Dhanvantari, an incarnation of Krishna. "Old", is not the same as "primitive", however, and some of the instructions of the Ayur-veda will remind today's reader of modern nutritional teachings or just plain common sense. Other instructions may seem less familiar, but they will bear themselves out if given the chance.

We shouldn't be surprised to see bodily health discussed in spiritual writings. The Vedas consider the human body a divine gift, a chance for the imprisoned soul to escape from the cycle of birth and death. The importance of healthful living in spiritual life is also mentioned by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-gita (6.16-17), "There is no possibility of becoming a yogi, O Arjuna, if one eats too much or eats too little, sleeps too much or does not sleep enough. One who is temperate in his habits of eating, sleeping, working, and recreation can mitigate all material pains by practicing the yoga system."

Proper eating has a double importance. Besides its role in bodily health-over-eating, eating in a disturbed or anxious state of mind, or eating unclean foods causes indigestion, "the parent of all diseases"-proper eating can help the aspiring transcendentalist attain mastery over his senses. "Of all the senses, the tongue is the most difficult to control," says the prasada-sevaya, a song composed by Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura, one of the spiritual predecessors of Srila Prabhupada, "but Krishna has kindly given us this nice prasada to help us control the tongue."

Here are a few guidelines for good eating taken from the Ayur-veda and other scriptures.

Spiritualize your eating

The Bhagavad-gita (17.8-10) divides foods into three classes: those of the quality of goodness, those of the quality of passion, and those of the quality of ignorance. The most healthful are the foods of goodness. "Foods of the quality of goodness [milk products, grains, fruits, and vegetables] increase the duration of life; purify one's existence; and give strength, health, happiness, and satisfaction. Such foods are sweet, juicy, fatty, and palatable."

Foods that are too bitter, sour, salty, pungent, dry or hot, are of the quality of passion and cause distress. But foods of the quality of ignorance, such as meat, fish, and fowl, described as "putrid, decomposed, and unclean," produce only pain, disease, and bad karma. In other words, what you eat affects the quality of your life. There is much needless suffering in the world today, because most people have no other criterion for choosing food than price and sensual desire.

The purpose of food, however, is not only to increase longevity and bodily strength, but also to purify the mind and consciousness. Therefore the spiritualist offers his food to the Lord before eating. Such offered food clears the way for spiritual progress. There are millions of people in India and around the world who would not consider eating unless their food was offered first to Lord Krishna.

### Eat at fixed times

As far as possible, take your main meal at the solar midday, when the sun is highest, because that's when your digestive power is strongest. Wait at least three hours after a light meal and five after a heavy meal before eating again. Eating at fixed times without snacking between meals helps make the mind and tongue peaceful.

### Eat in a pleasant atmosphere

A cheerful mood helps digestion; a spiritual mood, even more. Eat in pleasant surroundings and center the conversation around spiritual topics. According to the Ksema-kuntuhala, a Vedic cookbook from the 2nd century A.D., a pleasant atmosphere and a

good mood are as important to proper digestion as the quality of the food. Look upon your food as Krishna's mercy. Food is a divine gift, so cook it, server it, and eat it in a spirit of joyful reverence.

### Combine foods wisely

Foods should be combined for taste, and for efficient digestion and assimilation of nutrients. Rice and other grains go well with vegetables. Milk products such as cheese, yogurt and buttermilk go well with grains and vegetables, but fresh milk does not go well with vegetables. The typical Vedic lunch of rice, split-lentil soup, vegetables, and chapatis is a perfect balanced meal. Avoid combining vegetables with raw fruits. (Fruits are best eaten as a separate meal or with hot milk.) Also avoid mixing acidic fruits with alkaline fruits, or milk with fermented milk products.

### Share prasada with others

Srila Rupa Gosvami explains in the Upadesamrita a five-hundred year-old classic about devotional service, "One of the ways for devotees to express love is to offer prasada and accept prasada from one another." A gift from God is too good a thing to keep to oneself, so the scriptures recommend sharing prasada with others, be they friends or strangers. In ancient India-and many still follow the practice-householder would open his door at mealtime and call out, "Prasada! prasada! prasada! If anyone is hungry, let him come and eat!" After welcoming his guests and offering them all the comforts at his disposal, he would feed them to their full satisfaction before taking his own meal. Even if you can't follow this practice, look for occasions to offer prasada to others, and you will appreciate prasada more yourself.

### Be clean

Vedic culture places great emphasis on cleanliness, both internal and external. For internal cleanliness, we can cleanse the mind and heart of material contamination by chanting Vedic mantras, particularly the Hare Krishna mantra. External cleanliness includes keeping a high standard of cleanliness when cooking and eating.

Naturally this includes the usual good habits of washing the hands before eating, and the hands and mouth after.

### Eat moderately

Vitality and strength depend not on how much we eat, but on how much we are able to digest and absorb into our system. The stomach needs working space, so instead of filling it completely, fill it just halfway, by eating only half as much as you think you can, and leave a fourth of the space for liquids and the other fourth for air. You'll help your digestion and get more pleasure from eating. Moderate eating will also give satisfaction to your mind and harmony to your body. Overeating makes the mind agitated or dull and the body heavy and tired.

### Don't pour water on the fire of digestion

Visible flames and invisible combustion are two aspects of what we call "fire." Digestion certainly involves combustion. We often speak of "burning up" fat or calories, and the word "calorie" itself refers to the heat released when food is burned. The Vedas inform us that our food is digested by a fire called Jatharagni (the Fire in the Belly). Therefore, because we often drink with our meals, the effect of liquid on fire becomes an important consideration in the art of eating. Drinking before the meal tempers the appetite and, consequently, the urge to overeat. Drinking moderately while eating helps the stomach do its job, but drinking afterwards dilutes the gastric juices and reduces the fire of digestion. Wait at least an hour after eating before drinking again, and, if need be, you can drink every hour after that until the next meal.

### Don't waste food

The scriptures tell us that for every bit of food wasted in times of plenty, an equal amount will be lacking in times of need. Put on your plate only as much as you can eat, and save any leftovers for the next meal. (To reheat food it is usually necessary to add liquid and simmer in a covered pan. Stir well and frequently.) If for some reason prasada had to be discarded, then feed it to animals, bury it,

or put it in a body of water. Prasada is sacred and should never be put in the garbage. Whether cooking or eating, be careful about not wasting food.

Try an occasional fast

It may seem unusual for a cookbook to recommend fasting, but according to the Ayur-veda, fasting strengthens both will power and bodily health. An occasional fast gives the digestive system a rest and refreshes the senses, mind, and consciousness.

In most cases, the Ayur-veda recommends a water fast. Juice fasting is popular in the West because Western methods encourage long fasts. In Ayur-vedic treatment, however, most fasts are short—one to three days. While fasting, one should not drink more water than needed to quench one's thirst. Jatharagni, the fire of digestion, being freed from the task of digesting food, is busy incinerating the accumulated wastes in the body, and too much water inhibits the process.

Devotees of Krishna observe another kind of fast on Ekadasi, the eleventh day after the full moon and the eleventh day after the new moon, by abstaining from grains, peas, and beans. The Brahma-vaivarta scripture says, "One who observes Ekadasi is freed from all kinds of reactions to sinful activities, and thereby advances in pious life."

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