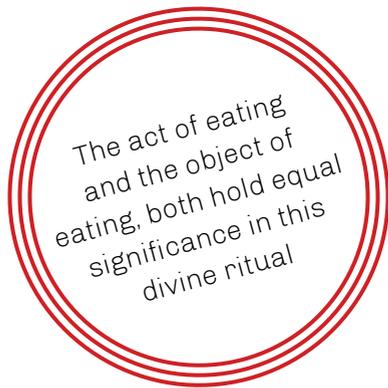


The Zen of eating right



Food is a reflection of the Divine. It sustains, nourishes, and fortifies life in this world. Yet, over time, the act of consuming food has become afflicted with a multitude of contaminations. **Punya Srivastava** takes a compelling look at these afflictions and finds out ways to eat right

Food is one of the most fundamental necessities of life, second only to breath. The act of eating is deeply divine. Putting a morsel of food in our mouth is akin to conducting a *yajna*—a sacrificial offering to please the deity. At its most subliminal level, a *yajna* is a ritual of sacrificing the *aham* (ego) to the sacred fire; offering it at the lotus feet of the Supreme Lord. At a physical level, it is a devotional offering to the deity that resides within our physical form—our Highest Self. Hence, the food that we consume is an offering to our Highest Self. And this is not restricted only to the aspect of eating; the thoughts we think and the breath we take are also significant offerings we make to our Highest Self. Hence, all of these primal acts require deep mindfulness.

“Annam Brahma, raso Vishnu, bhokta deva Maheshwara.” Food is Brahma, the essence in it

is Vishnu, and the one who partakes of it is Maheshwara. Food is divine, and we partake of the divine to nourish the divine; hence, the act of consumption—right from sowing the seeds to putting food in the mouth—needs to be honoured. The act of eating and the object of eating, both hold equal significance in this divine ritual.

Body's intelligence

Renowned environment and food activist Dr Vandana Shiva has deep conviction in the divinity of food which is cultivated in recognition of the sacredness of the earth and the farmer. She says, "*Annam Brahman*—food is divinity. Food is the basis of life. It nourishes body and mind alike. Commodification of food is a violation of food as sustenance." It is important to understand that what we eat and how we eat has an impact on our body, mind, and spirit.

Our food choices and habits have undergone tremendous changes as we have evolved over the ages. Today, as we bask in the glory of living smart and comfortable lives, we are inundated with choices galore in every aspect of life. In food too, we have an array of fad diets to choose from—vegan, raw vegan, keto, paleo, and what not! The list goes on and on!

This gives rise to many questions: Which foods

are right for us and which are not? Is gluten harmful to us? Is milk not the complete food it was once touted to be? Does raw food really cause more harm than good? Where do we look for answers as each diet comes with a huge list of pros and cons.

Well, the answer lies in tuning in to your own body and listening to it deeply. Our body has its own intelligence. That is how it is able to heal itself of an anomaly, when not meddled with. The intelligence which is running this Universe is running through our physical body too and governing all its functions. And the same innate intelligence guides us regarding our food choices according to the body's need in a specific demography and climate. It is this intelligence which manifests in young kids as a constant reluctance to drink any other milk after weaning off breast milk. It is this intelligence which makes a dog chew on grass when having an upset stomach. The only difference between a man and a dog, in this case, is that man's intelligence has become heavily shrouded by cultural and industrial indoctrination.

"Your body is very intelligent. It can talk to you. All you need to do is to listen to it and work accordingly. Observe how you feel after a meal. Do you feel sleepy or energetic? Pay attention to these signals," exhorts Rupinder Kaur, a Delhi based raw food enthusiast, who completely healed herself of all the afflictions ailing her, including a long bout of jaundice.

Follow your instincts

Pondicherry based Naturopath Dr Nandita Shah, Founder of SHARAN India, gives a practical parameter to understand if your palate is being ruled by the market forces or not. "Make a list of all the foods that are advertised and simply stop eating those. No one would spend money to advertise foods that are instinctual to us. That is why we don't see advertisements for oranges and apples or carrots and cucumbers," she says.

According to Dr Shah, every animal instinctively knows what it needs to eat, save



humans who have lost touch with their instincts. "We eat according to culture, advertisements, and taste. But this is not always healthy and often leads to lots of lifestyle diseases," she explains. Isn't she right? Whenever we visit an orchard or a farmers' market resplendent with fresh fruits and vegetables, don't we wish to eat them right away? That is our instinct working!

My relationship with food began to change after I started listening to my body. I have started chewing more and can feel the sweetness of food mixing with saliva in my mouth. In a similar manner, mindfully swirling a swig of water in my mouth for a while has slaked my parched throat in a much more satisfying manner than gulping down huge sips of it. Now I do not eat after my body signals me to stop, taste notwithstanding. I have also heavily cut down on eating packaged foods after I observed that they made me feel bloated and uncomfortable.

I have realised that I have the power to decide what my body requires and which food is going to provide me with ample nourishment. Of course, years of conditioning, habits, and belief systems do come into play. The whole effort then is to rise above them and find for myself a flexible diet that is in alignment with my needs. I am learning to discern and answer to my body's nourishment needs.

Know thy body

Becoming flexible with food choices is the mandatory step each one of us needs to take while dealing with food and nutrition. Since evolution is an ongoing process, we are perennially on this journey. Hence, it is of utmost importance to open our minds and test for ourselves what works for us and what does not, with complete commitment to our health and well-being. Our body's instinct—and not any external factor—should govern our food choices. Another important thing to keep in mind is that each person is different and thus, no one blanket diet works for all.

According to the science of ayurveda, all the

five elements of nature—earth, water, fire, air, and space—are present in our body and are governed by three operating principles or *doshas*—*vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. At birth, nature instills in us a particular combination of *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*, which we call our *prakriti* (constitution). The ayurveda-based diet plan pays attention to the individual constitution and then tweaks the diet to balance the *doshas*. For example, a *vata*-balancing diet is usually warm and soupy, whereas a *pitta*-balancing diet can be sweeter and cooler. Hence, it is advisable to be aware of one's constitution since it provides a guide to the kind of food one may or may not have.

Rupinder observes that Indian regional and traditional food is very well thought of. But she also maintains that observing one's body to gauge its reactions to one's routine diet is essential. "For some people, eating curd at night is okay but for many others, it is a complete no-no. This is because of varying *vata-pitta-kapha* imbalances in each person. It is always wise to keep your mind open and make changes wisely to meet your needs easily," she says.

Now that we have put this out of the way, let us look at some of the common features that can help us decide for ourselves a diet optimum for our palate.

Be mindful

In his book, *How to Eat*, renowned Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "When we can slow down and really enjoy our food, our life takes on a much deeper quality. When I eat in this way, not only am I physically nourished, I am also spiritually nourished." A meal begins as soon as we sit down at the table. "Whether we are serving the food or waiting to be served, we can use this time to prepare our soul for the nourishment ahead. It is a time to feel joy and gratitude," Hanh says.

According to Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, our body and brain work at their best only when the stomach is empty. "Be conscious and eat in such



Raw warrior

Raw food gave Rupinder Kaur a second lease of life

a way that within two-and-a-half hours, the food moves out of the stomach bag, and within 12 to 18 hours, it is completely out of the system. If you maintain this simple awareness, you will experience much more energy, agility, and alertness.”

Apparently, studies have found that the human brain works best when the stomach is empty. Researchers found that an empty stomach produces ghrelin which stimulates and heightens the performance of the hippocampus, the region in the brain that handles learning, memory, and spatial analysis, keeping us alert, active, and focused. This, of course, doesn't imply that we should never eat, but rather points to the fact that we should be conscious of how much we eat.

Applying awareness to this activity not only slows down the whole process of eating—resulting in the appropriate consumption of food and easy digestion—but also slows down the effects our food consumption has on this planet. “This plate of food—so fragrant and so appealing—also contains much suffering,” Hanh writes. According to a study report on food wastage published in *The Guardian*, it apparently takes anywhere between 500 to 4,000 litres of water to produce one kg of wheat while meat production requires 5,000 to 20,000 litres of water for one kg. Production of one kg of potatoes requires 287 litres of water. Hence, one should not forget the number of resources and sacrifices that have gone into making a plateful of nourishing sustenance.

Embrace natural foods

Another way of making our food closest to nature is by eating a whole food-plant based diet. Dr Rupa Shah, an MBBS doctor who embraced a whole food-plant based diet in 2008, says, “Naturopathy draws one's attention to food in its most natural condition. Food is often, rawer. Here, one diet plan is given to all, which can be tweaked according to an individual's constitution.”

Raw food, which consists of fruits and uncooked vegetables, nuts and seeds, and fresh herbs, is laden with *prana* or life-energy. Freshly plucked fruits and vegetables are full of *prana* and are the best choice for a *sattvic* diet. The more a food item undergoes storage, processing, preservation, and cooking, the lesser is the amount of *prana* in it. Food which is cooked in oil and spices (*rajasic*) is low on *prana* while all the meats and stale food (collectively regarded as *tamasic*) is dead food, without any trace of *prana* in it.

“We are the only species that makes its food less nutritious by refining before eating it. Oil, sugar, white rice, and white flour are good examples of this. We also peel fruits and vegetables before eating them, whereas the

maximum nutrition is just under the peel. So, when we refine, we lose a lot of nutrition and essential fibre. Therefore, I always recommend a whole food plant-based diet, organic as far as possible," says Dr Nandita Shah. Talking about dairy products, she says that cow's milk is for calves, but we have learnt to consume it. "Right now, because of our culture, we are eating foods suitable to humans as well as those meant for other species. No wonder we are sick."

From the variety of foods that we consume, it is better to identify the foods that can or cannot be eaten raw. Eating is a process which entails chewing the food well to allow the first stage of digestion to happen; digesting it in the stomach and absorbing the nutrients; assimilating them to various parts of the body; and, finally, eliminating the waste from the body. Not all foods eaten raw can be digested or assimilated well by the body. However, raw foods are beneficial for the body, provided one completes all the stages of eating food. Some people cannot digest raw foods in excess. "A balance of raw and cooked foods in our daily diet is ideal. Humans are able to digest raw as well as cooked food," says Dr Rupa Shah.

Bangalore based Deepa Devi shares how, after attending Rupinder Kaur's workshop on raw diet, she and her family increased the consumption of raw foods. "This addition of raw foods to our diets has helped us explore a new avenue to a healthy lifestyle. We started with juices and smoothies, and later discovered many interesting recipes. It is unbelievable how much you can play with raw food recipes. These recipes are a great way to detox our systems. Although we are not on a 100 per cent raw diet, we can still feel a lot of clarity in our thoughts. Our bodies feel light and life has started inching towards a holistic path," she shares.

Go local

Our food should be fresh, seasonal, and

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local as far as possible. Fresh fruits, juices, smoothies, and salads should be a part of one's regular diet regardless of one being a raw vegan, vegan, vegetarian, or macrobiotic. People mostly start eating consciously because of health issues, but this alone should not be the reason for taking care of your diet. Traditionally, Indians have been eating plenty of natural foods in the form of seasonal fruits, leafy vegetables, and vegetables that can be eaten raw, because of the country's diverse demography and agrarian disposition.

"I grew up in a house with a huge garden with a number of fruit trees, seasonal vegetables and leafy greens. I remember snacking on ripe guavas in the afternoons. It was a routine for me. At that time, we never knew or cared about whether this would fall under a fad diet or a lifestyle or a movement. In India, fresh fruits, vegetables, and greens are sold on the roadsides. Similarly, juicing is not a new concept in our country. Sugarcane juice or orange/sweet lime juice are sold at every nook and corner of the country, even today," shares Rupinder.

Going local also reduces one's carbon footprint. Sourcing local and seasonal food items saves the planet from the undue pressure of catering to artificially created demands. Nature is benevolent enough to provide all the necessary nutrients in different varieties of plants growing in various parts of the world. It doesn't play favourites. If the south of India is



Our body has its own intelligence. That is how it is able to heal itself of an anomaly, when not meddled with. The intelligence which is running this Universe is running through our physical body too and governing all its functions.



inundated with coconut trees, its west has been bestowed with groundnuts, and the north with mustard, to source oils. One should stick to the locally available foods instead of having olive oil or oats when both of these are not even native to our land.

Another aspect of eating correctly is to go seasonal. Bottlegourd tastes best in summers while cauliflower, in winters. There are certain foods which produce heat in the body, like sesame. Traditionally, Indians ate sesame on a daily basis during winters. "Consuming sesame kept them warm and their skin clean, which has a tendency to break during cold weather. With lots of heat in the body, your skin won't break. Similarly, in summer, people ate cooling foods like *kambu* (pearl millet) in Tamil Nadu," says



Sadhguru. How many of us in North India still use *sattu* (roasted gram flour) to keep our bodies cool during the summers? It has been virtually wiped away from our urban kitchens.

Change lifestyle

Foods that were eaten traditionally may not suit everyone because of the way food is grown, harvested, and prepared these days. So even though we used to eat certain foods quite heavily, it is better that we don't do it now.

Sharing an example, Dr Rupa Shah highlights how *ghee*, which used to be a staple in Rajasthan, has to be eaten in moderation today. "The same people now cannot eat it in large doses, as the quality of *ghee* is not the same anymore because of the way cattle



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HOW TO EAT FRUITS

By Rupinder Kaur

- Raw food like fruits and salads are quick to digest. Hence, they should be consumed before a cooked meal and not with it or immediately after it; generally, one hour before and two hours after a heavy meal.
- The best time to have fruits is in the morning on an empty stomach.
- Melons should be eaten alone because they are very watery. Better not to combine with other fruits.
- Have fruits when they are completely ripe. For example, eat bananas when they have turned yellow and/or have spots on them.

are used for dairy production. Moreover, our current lifestyle has become more sedentary and people no more live under harsh, extremely dry and hot weather conditions, thanks to the comforts of air conditioning. Similar is the case with other milk products. Regional, seasonal, organic, fresh, and whole plant-based foods are the best. However, the exact opposite is in vogue now," she laments.

There are many other factors which influence our relationship with food. First on the list is emotions. "We eat when we are stressed," says Dr Nandita Shah, adding, "Perhaps, that is the time when we are likely to eat all the wrong foods. We love comfort foods—foods that we have been brought up on. Emotions play a big part in our food choices." Isn't it why most of the advertisements for all the wrong kinds of food (read processed and packaged) are heavy on emotions?

There are lots of stressors in our lives today. People are working late hours in sedentary jobs. Physical rigour has reduced tremendously, and sleep is highly disturbed. Sometimes people even skip their meals to meet their deadlines. As a result, they tend to overeat or crave unhealthy foods when they get time. Hence, the

body does all the hard work at odd hours. Most of our dinners are eaten before television sets or while chatting over the phone. With the easy availability of fast foods and takeaways, so many of us munch on food while on the go. Food is so easily available that we have lost reverence for it. Late night parties, heavy and oily food, and overeating—all these tax our own bodies.

Rupinder shares a list of ways to correct food habits. "In India, we tend to overcook our food. At times, we also reheat the food. These practices reduce its nutritional value. Try to prepare fresh meals and consume immediately. Use steel utensils rather than the coated ones. The microwave is a big no-no. Follow a flexible routine for meals. Have your last meal before sunset if possible." Drinking a glass of lukewarm water on an empty stomach half-an-hour before the main meal and then an hour later helps in maintaining the digestive prowess of the system. Another important component of a healthy palate is probiotics (curds and other naturally fermented foods).

Don't confuse the digestive system

Today, we are making the most out of our exposure to world cuisine. Social media is replete with food videos and food challenges where everyone is vying for viewers' attention. However, most of these videos promote wrong food combinations. Fruits are highly alkaline and digest easily. When they are combined with acidic foods such as milk, cream, and cheese, or are baked or cooked, their nutrients suffer a huge blow. The system gets confused as the fruit in that papaya milkshake gets easily broken down while the ice-cream and whipped-cream-laden milk takes several hours to assimilate. This causes a lot of acidity and flatulence, and the system becomes sluggish when subjected to this kind of incompatible food combinations or *viruddha ahara* regularly.

Avoid complex foods

Complex foods—that which undergo several



steps of processing, refinement, and cooking—are too heavy and confusing for our digestive system. Even though our body has its own intelligence and works according to it, odd food combinations confuse it and slow down the digestive fire. Baked items with large quantities of trans fats as well as artificial sugars and salts make our system sluggish and lethargic. Having a cheese (the most complex and tedious protein that our body has to process for the next several hours)-laden pizza followed by donuts or chocolate cake is the cruellest punishment we can give to our body. Not only are these foods complex, but acidic as well. All the dairy products are also complex, acidic foods. Having bread and milk-tea in the morning on an empty stomach is the surest way of getting prone to chronic acidity.

It is common knowledge that non-vegetarians suffer more than vegetarians from acidity since meat is acidic. However, there is another interesting angle too to this proposition. According to Darryl D'Souza, a Goa based nutritionist and acupressure therapist, vegetarians too suffer from acidity and all the illnesses caused by it. "Though vegetarians think that eating vegetables keeps them alkaline, what they fail to understand is that they counter the alkalinity of vegetables by using too many spices and by eating an excess of acidic grains, lentils, and beans as part of their staple diet," he says.

Get involved in the process

Eating can be the most intimate act with one's self. It is advisable to get involved with the whole process of sourcing, preparing, and consuming food, as much as one can. When each family member contributes to the process of preparing meals—from selecting fruits and vegetables to cutting and chopping; cooking to laying the table and serving—the intimacy extends and envelops the whole family into a blanket of love. It is not surprising then to know that meals cooked and consumed passionately excite our taste buds and digestive enzymes.

ACIDIC AND ACID-INDUCING FOODS By Darryl D'Souza

- **Vegetables:** Potato, corn, mushrooms, and winter squash.
- **Fruits:** Canned or glazed fruits, and dried fruits.
- **Grains:** amaranth, wheat bran, oat bran, and cornstarch, rye.
- **Legumes and beans:** Chickpeas and lentils.
- **Beverages:** Alcohol, coffee, tea, cocoa, and soft drinks and colas.
- All the **processed foods** like sugar, noodles, macaroni, spaghetti, soda, flour, wheat bread, pasta, sweets, biscuits, and confectionery items. All the dairy products as well as animal proteins like meats and seafood.

Moreover, eating is supposed to be a sensory experience. According to the Vedas, the hands are the most precious organs of action. The scriptures reveal how every finger is an extension of the five elements of nature. Hence, eating with one's fingers stimulates these five elements and helps in bringing forth digestive juices into the stomach. The nerve endings on our fingertips are known to stimulate digestion. Feeling your food becomes a way of signalling the stomach that you are about to eat. You become more conscious of the taste, textures, and aromas.

Hence, if each one of us mindfully takes responsibility for one's own platter, chances are that it may result in better health, minimal wastage, and compassion for this planet. This also evokes a sense of gratitude for all the love mother earth bestows on us in the form of nourishing bounty.

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