

[THE HINDU MEANING OF FOOD](#)

Category : [August 1982](#)

Published by Anonymous on Aug. 02, 1982

THE HINDU MEANING OF FOOD

Nutritional awareness has always been an important part of the Hindu heritage. Hindus have always believed in food habits conducive to good health and longevity. The Taitiriya Upanishad says, "From food...creatures that dwell on earth are produced;...by food they live;...into it they finally pass...Truly, food is the chief of all beings; therefore it is called a panacea." Thus, the scriptures teach us that food is life itself. The human body is made up of the food we take into it; even the mind is food in a very fine form. Thus, our food influences every one of our activities, including our thinking. Lately Western science is reflecting this concept, "We are what we eat," we are being told.

For Hindus, daily life is closely tied to religious beliefs and teachings. Food is considered so sacred that even a grain of rice dropped on the floor is picked up. The Vedas say that one should worship food, for it enables the use of all the faculties - and through (proper) food comes the end of all ignorance.

Foods are thought to produce certain changes in people. These changes are classified under three gunas - satva, rajas and tamas - which are present in varying degrees in all objects, gross and subtle, including the mind, intellect and ego. Satva guna makes one religious, compassionate and prone to good conduct. Raja guna makes one active, hardworking, courageous and enduring. Tama guna makes one indolent and prone to criminal behavior. Satvic foods, such as milk and fruits, are eaten by ascetics, since they promote spiritual growth and good character. Rajasic food, such as meat, creates attachment and gives strength to warriors. Tamasic food, such as garlic in combination with other herbs and spices, is thought to produce laziness, but is considered beneficial in special cases, such as for lactating women.

The Hindu religion has traditionally taught the designing of diets based on needs, but generally following a predominance of satvic foods and minimizing rajasic and tamasic foods. This would make for spiritual growth in individuals, so that society

would exist harmoniously, without the evils of crime, quarrels, litigation, etc.

Sri Susrutha, the "father of Hindu medicine," wrote a treatise on medicine in 600 B.C., known as Susrutha Samhitha. This dealt with the causes of diseases and their treatment, modes of surgery, nutrition, etc. He postulated that the human body was controlled by three systems: 'vayu', the nervous system 'pitham', the digestive system, and 'khapam', the excretory system (including lungs, kidneys, skin, etc.) As noted in the Kural, these three systems, working in balance, keep the body free from disease. By examining the pulse, a doctor or an experienced elder could easily determine which of the three systems was not working normally and prescribe a remedial diet to bring the systems back into balance again. Thus, a simple, timely and effective system of health maintenance was in existence thousands of years ago, without the drawbacks of side-effects of drugs in most cases. This was used almost continually in daily life, allowing for corrective action to be taken as early as the next meal, after the onset of the earliest symptoms. The Holy Kural tells us: "No medicine is necessary if the right food is taken after considering how the previous meal has been digested." (Verse 942).

Seen from the Hindu perspective, food becomes part and parcel of the overall system of body, mind, spiritual development and society. This sophisticated way of dealing with the body, food and medicine has generally persisted up to the present, although technological and foreign influences (such as taking stimulants like coffee, processed 'convenience' foods, etc.) have eroded beliefs in those values.

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.