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WOMEN OF VISION

Food and Breath: Sustaining the Body

Spiritualizing meal preparation and controlling our breath tunes us to Nature's cosmic rhythms

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Food is divinely intertwined with the body. According to ancient Vedic seers, all things grown on the Earth, the human body and entire universe are all food, annam. The principle of annam is that all things physical are composed of the five Ayurvedic elements--earth, water, fire, air and space. The elements of our food, our annam, nurture and feed the same elements of our bodies. When we become mindful of this divine connection, every bite of food is a blessing from Mother Nature. In this manner, we begin to practice sadhana, the art of living in harmony with nature's rhythms. Balanced physical, mental and spiritual health grows into our lives like the sprouting of a good seed.

The following experience illustrates instant and profound benefits. Recently, Joyce attended a food sadhana workshop. Throughout, she was uneasy and distracted in her seat. Afterwards, Joyce told me she had a history of chronic migraines. Although she had tried several different medicines

and therapies, nothing had worked. Moreover, she continually experienced an uncontrollable urge to binge on junk foods. The more she ate, the more severe her migraines became. I explained to Joyce the relationship between food and the body, and the effect of sadhana practice on our health. I gave her this simple food sadhana regime:

Be mindful in your approach and attitude toward food. These simple steps will help you: 1. Make your kitchen a sacred, simplified space. 2. Know where your food comes from. Use fresh, seasonal and organically grown foods. 3. Grind fresh spice seeds in a mortar and pestle for everyday use. 4. At the same times everyday, prepare and eat two ample meals. 5. Practice gratitude before imbibing a healthful meal by offering food to Mother Nature. Traditionally, a small portion of each cooked food is offered to the fire before tasted or served. The offering may be accompanied by any prayer you choose. 6. Observe silence during meals. 7. Following meals, while your food is being digested, take a brief stroll or sit on your heels for 20 minutes.

Two months later, I received a letter from Joyce with a recent photograph of herself. She glowed with good health. She was still on her sadhana program. Her migraines had disappeared. Joyce had only one brief setback one week after she started the program. Immediately after a junk food binge, she experienced a migraine again. This convinced Joyce to stick to her healthy regime. Two months later she was free from migraines and had even lost weight.

Breath: According to the Vedas, our breath extends from the

cosmos' prana and controls both the quality and length of our life. Life is defined not by the number of years on Earth, but by the number of breaths each soul is given for its journey. When we expend our ration of breath, our journey ends. Vedic seers advised maintaining slow and rhythmic breathing, pranayama, by synchronizing our rhythms with cosmic rhythms.

The right nostril's breath controls solar rhythms and the left lunar rhythms. Learning to activate or de-activate the right and left breaths in accordance with daily rhythms, we strengthen our prana and extend duration and quality of our life.

The following simple methods realign the breath with day and night energies to create balance. To monitor your breath, first ascertain which nostril is exhaling more air. Block your left nostril with a finger and blow out your right, holding your hand beneath the nose. Feel the force of air expelling. Then do the same on the opposite side, blocking your right nostril and blowing from the left. The strongest blown air is the side at which you are currently dominant. When the breath is strongest at the right side, the solar breath is activated. When the breath is strongest at the left side, lunar breath is activated. In Ayurveda, the motive is to harmonize the body with the environment. We harmonize with the day by activating our lunar breath, and the night by activating our solar breath.

Activating lunar breath in early morning: 1. Check the breath to see which side is stronger. 2. If the lunar breath is stronger, you are in tune with the day's cosmic rhythms. 3. If the right breath is stronger, make a fist with your left hand and place your fist under the right armpit. Using your right hand, alternate your breathing, from nostril to nostril, for a few

minutes, or until you feel the left breath gain more volume than the right. 4. Release the fist from the armpit and perform a breath check once more to gauge the volume of both breaths. 5. Your cooling lunar breath should now be more active.

6. Do not engage in this exercise for more than 15 minutes.

Activating solar breath in the early evening: 1. Check the breaths to determine which is more active. 2. If the solar breath is stronger, you are in tune with evening cosmic rhythms. 3. If the left breath is stronger, make a fist with your right hand, placing it under the left armpit. Using your left hand, alternate breathing from nostril to nostril, for a few minutes, or until you feel the right breath gain more volume than the left breath. 4. Your heating solar breath should now be more active. 5. Do not engage in this exercise for more than 15 minutes. By practicing pranayama properly, we may quickly realize many changes in attitudes and feelings. We may feel a deep inner calm and detachment to life's events.

MAYA TIWARI, founder of the Wise Earth School of Ayurveda, is reviving and reintroducing Vedic Earth Sadhana teachings. An established author, her columns for Hinduism Today are based on her newest work, Migrant Spirit: Recovering Our Ancestral Memories, to be published in the spring of 1999. Tiwari lives reclusively as a brahmacharini in Asheville, North Carolina, USA.