

# **The Yogic Diet For Optimum Health and Peace of Mind**

We'll briefly look at a few reasons why yogis have recommended a vegetarian (no meat, fish, eggs, alcohol) diet for over 5000 years as the best for improving and maintaining good health and a clear, focused mind.

## **What's on Your Plate and What's in Your Mind are Related**

The ultimate goal of meditation and in fact, all Yoga practices, is to have a mind that is peaceful, clear, and one-pointed. One of the greatest impacts on the quality of mind is our diet.

Yogis have recommended a pure, natural vegetarian diet for millennia as being best suited for rapid and sure progress in meditation. To understand why this is so, let's discuss three important terms: *sattwa*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. These three, known collectively as the three *gunas* (qualities or forces), are the fundamental forces of nature. Respectively representing balance, activity, and inertia, they are a bit reminiscent of neutrons, electrons, and protons.

All activities, as well as all foods, are grouped into one of the categories. The principle is that foods within a category will influence the mind in a like way. Foods in the sattwic category will tend to leave the mind in a balanced state, foods in the rajasic category will cause the mind to be restless, and foods in the tamasic category will tend to make the mind dull. It's reasonable that yogis would be interested in having a diet that consists mostly of foods in the sattwic category. Here's a brief summary of which food fall into each category.

### **Sattwa**

Raw, steamed, lightly sautéed, or roasted vegetables, sprouts, fruits, nuts, dairy (in moderation)

Cooked grains, beans, nuts, soy products

Food that is tasty, lightly spiced, not sour or too hot

### **Rajas**

Meat, fish, eggs, spicy food, onions, garlic

### **Tamas**

Beef, alcoholic beverages, old, cold, over cooked

Most of what we eat should be of the sattwic category. At the same time, most of us have a tendency toward *tamas*: fatigue, sluggishness, etc. Therefore, a little rajasic food can help diminish the tamasic aspect. So, it's fine to have some onions, garlic, and a little spice (like ginger, or cinnamon) in the diet as needed. In fact, when the weather is cold and damp (a tamasic state), a little more of these rajasic foods will help keep the body and mind in balance. The same is true if you are suffering from a cold, another tamasic state. Adding some spice to your diet will help speed the cold on its way.

Fresh, vegetarian foods are great sources of the life force (prana). For example, consider grains and other vegetables. They carry with them prana in an active, living way. Grains can be sprouted, tomatoes contains seeds, which house the power to create more tomatoes - more life. That is a proof that there is still life force in vegetarian food. Prana is really what the body and mind need to live. It is more important than nutrients. Meat is a dead food. You can't plant any part of a chicken to get more chicken. This is

why just being vegetarian alone is not quite enough to assure better health and mental functioning.

### **The Nonviolent Diet: I Don't Eat Animals and They Don't Eat Me**

In addition to adhering to the principle of the three gunas, a vegetarian diet is best for Yoga because it is the most nonviolent diet. No doubt, life is always taken for us to live. Even a potato sacrifices its existence for our sustenance, and it has its own consciousness, but it is not on the same state as ours. It is more like deep sleep. Like a human who feels no pain during surgery because they are under anesthesia, a potato doesn't suffer. On the other hand, an animal can sense its impending death. The fear, emotional turmoil, and suffering it undergoes is transferred to its flesh. That anxiety stays in the meat in the form of bile and other toxic chemicals released during stress and in the form of subtle vibrations of fear. When we eat meat, we absorb those vibrations, the subtle impressions of fear and suffering the animal experienced before its slaughter. That's why eating meat tends to make us more restless and aggressive. It's not impossible to be a calm, loving person if you eat meat (recall that Lord Jesus taught that, *"It's not so much what goes into a person's mouth that defiles them, but what comes out."*), but it is definitely more difficult.

Some people are aware of the suffering the animals undergo so they offer a prayer of thanksgiving to the animal for giving its life so they can live. In this way, they believe they are not creating as much bad karma or are scrubbing it away with their loving intent. Maybe in the past, this approach had merit, but not today. Most animals are treated with great cruelty. They lead very unnatural, painful lives and are often treated in a way that seems to be completely ignorant that they are thinking, feeling beings.

The Tirukural, a sacred text from India states, *"All creatures will reverently salute and offer their prayers for those who refuse to eat meat."*

### **A Diet Less Toxic**

Another point to consider regarding adopting a vegetarian diet is the time it takes for food waste to leave our body. In general, it takes two days for what you eat today to leave the body as waste. Meat putrefies during that time, causing the acids, gases, and toxins to accumulate in the intestine (much of which gets absorbed in the body, weakening the immune system, for one thing). Meat-eating animals have much shorter intestines in relation to body length than human beings. Meat is also nutritionally very dense, so the body doesn't need much time to absorb the nutrients. Vegetarian food, on the other hand, does not putrefy during its two-day journey. And since the nutrients require more time to be absorbed, the problem of absorbing the toxins of partially digested, putrefied food does not exist to nearly the same degree.

Meat is also a very acidic food. Excess acid leads to many diseases and disorders. It irritates the nervous system and can be a major causative factor in inflammatory diseases like arthritis and heart disease.

Considering the arguments for adopting a vegetarian diet listed above, and since we do not need meat to be healthy, it seems like a good idea to at least try to gently, gradually reduce the amount of meat in your diet. Experiment with the vast number of vegetarian options open to you and note how the change in your diet affects your physical and mental well-being.

### **Who's Cooking My Food?**

Now, let's look at or diet from a completely different viewpoint: the cook. The mindset of the cook greatly affects the amount of prana in the food. Also, a bad-tempered chef will infect even the best of food with his or her toxic attitude. If you are that cook, and you're in a testy mood, better to stop the food preparation until the feeling passes. Traditionally, in India, cooks were taken from only the *brahmin*, or priestly caste. If bad vibes can infect your food, good ones can enhance it. Play uplifting music or chant while you cook. Serve the food with love as if it were an offering to God (and in a sense, it truly is). Cook the food with love, serve it with love, and eat it with love.

One more point to reflect on regarding how and what we eat and our peace of mind. Eat mindfully for the best digestion and enjoyment of your meal. When you eat, make sure the mind is calm and clear. That is one of the reasons for saying a meal prayer before eating is such a strong tradition in most every spiritual tradition. If you don't know a meal prayer, you can just sit for a minute or two, watch your breath and calm the mind. It would also be helpful to hold the thought of gratitude to the Mother Earth for bringing forth food for your sustenance. The amount of food, especially near the time of meditation, is also important. A light stomach is best. Ideally, finish a meal at least 2 hrs. before meditating.