

Food Sadhana

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Dedication

Food Sadhana in four parts is dedicated to all students of yoga in the Himalayan tradition.

Blessed by Swami Veda Bharati for publication, this series details various food practices as passed down to us in the traditions of Yoga and Ayurveda. If you find the suggestions helpful, please pass them along so other students can benefit. This writer's hope is that you will be inspired to be more mindful of your food choices, and you will thereby create a strong foundation for good health, happiness and long life. In gratitude to the many fine teachers who inspired these offerings.

Om shanti, shanti, shanti.

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"The yoga approach to health is extremely simple, logical, and practical. It lays stress on the words *Yuktahar viharasya* - eating and living as they should be done. By simply studying one's own capacity and learning how to regulate one's dietary habits, external activities, and thinking process, it is possible for one to gain control over his life and remain healthy. This does not mean that one must do anything unnatural or impossible; there need not be restrictions, but given the information in these lessons, one can decide what is best for himself, and implement whatever changes he chooses, practicing them according to his own capacity." - Swami Rama, *A Practical Guide to Holistic Health*, pp. 5-6

Part I: Mindful Eating

Been feeling rushed lately? Do you find yourself eating at your desk or grabbing a bite as you run for the train? Or maybe, you've been feeling bored. So you sit on the couch watching TV with a snack, and before you know it, you've eaten the whole bag. Maybe you've been following a diet plan but your heartburn is still acting up and your energy level isn't what it used to be. What can we do?

Ayurveda teaches us that how we eat is as important as what we eat and when and where we eat. We can make better choices and improve our relationship with food through the practice of mindfulness.

Modern research concurs. The practice of mindful eating has been shown to reduce over-eating, provide better weight management, improve digestion and help prevent chronic disease. Mindfulness training is currently being prescribed for people with eating disorders, type II diabetes and for cancer survivors. There are many excellent resources on-line for anyone wanting to incorporate the practice of mindful eating into their daily lives.

When individuals begin to practice mindful eating they report better digestion, better energy and more enjoyment. They find it easier to make healthy choices and manage their weight without resorting to the latest diet fad. Overall, mindful eating can lead to a healthier relationship with our food, with ourselves and with our world, as they are all interconnected.

To get started, try the following experiment. Set aside about 20 minutes when you will not be interrupted and you are hungry but not starved. Choose an apple (or one of your favorite foods) and place it on a table. Sit down, close your eyes and become aware of your breath for a short while in order to relax and clear your mind. Then open your eyes and look at the apple. Notice and appreciate its appearance. Then reach out and touch the apple, feeling its texture. Bring the apple to your mouth but pause to smell the apple. Now take a bite, noticing the sound it makes. Then be aware of the taste sensations in your mouth as you begin to chew. Does the taste change as you continue to chew? Continue eating the rest of the apple with mindfulness. Then rest and reflect on this direct experience. What happened? How did you feel? Did you enjoy the experiment?

The next step is to eat an entire meal with mindfulness. Here are some tips on how to practice:

1. Eat sitting down in a settled environment. This means stop multi-tasking, turn off the electronics, and clear away clutter. The idea is to reduce distractions and create a pleasant environment.
2. Take a few moments to relax. Sit down and practice breath awareness for a few breaths. Be aware of your surroundings. Relaxation is a prerequisite for good digestion.
3. Set your intention. You are choosing to practice mindful eating.
4. Be grateful. Say grace or thanks for the food you are about to eat.

5. Be mindful of all the senses as you take your first bite.
6. Chew your food well. Notice how the taste changes as you chew.
7. Set down your utensils between bites. The idea is to savor your food.
8. Proceed at a moderate pace, not too fast and not too slow.
9. Notice when you first begin to feel full. This is a good time to stop eating.
10. Rest after eating. Rest for a few minutes at the table before moving on to the next activity.

The beauty of mindful eating is the focus on direct experience, not some abstract idea of what we should be eating. Over time we begin to notice things. We connect to our inner wisdom. We realize that how we eat affects how we feel. There is no rush to make changes. The advice is to just notice without judgment. Let the process reveal itself.

It may seem difficult to maintain your mindfulness throughout the whole meal. When you realize that your attention has wandered, simply bring it back to the next bite of food and begin again without judgment. When finished, take some time to reflect. Then decide how often you want to practice. Some people choose to practice just once a week, or once a day at first. Others practice just at the beginning of each meal. However you proceed, you are following your own wisdom. After some time, you may find yourself altering your food choices or eating less. Let the process proceed naturally. Follow your gut!

The science of Ayurveda recommends that we eat when hungry after our previous meal has been digested. The rationale is to honor our digestive capacity. If we eat too often, we can overwhelm our ability to digest. The same goes for overeating or eating on the run. Here is a mindfulness practice to help us gauge our appetite.

Before selecting the food for each meal, check in and gauge your appetite on a scale of 0 to 10 with zero being famished (empty of food) and ten being stuffed (full of food). The same measurement is then used to gauge when we've had enough to eat. The idea is to eat when the appetite is around 2 but stop when the appetite is around 7 or 8 (when we are approximately 70-80% full). This is called staying within your comfortable capacity.

At this point, let us recall the five-fold method advocated by yoga science (see Yoga Sutra I.20) as can be applied to mindful eating:

1. Faith - Hearing the benefits of mindful eating increases our faith or conviction.
2. Effort - Next we set our intention and give it a try.
3. Mindfulness - The whole process is facilitated by mindfulness.
4. Concentration - Over time mindfulness becomes relaxed concentration. We learn to focus on our direct experience without being distracted. According to Swami Veda Bharati, when we are "mindful of each bite or each sip, then each sip can be samadhi."
5. Wisdom - Our inner wisdom grows as we make new insights. We are continuously refining our relationship with food.

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"Thus one casts suffering far away by the continual close application of mindfulness."

-Tibetan Blue Beryl Medical Tantra

Suggested Reading: Swami Rama: A Practical Guide to Holistic Health