

## Food Sadhana: Part 4 of 4

### The Sattvic or Yogic Diet

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Sattva is defined as the quality of purity and goodness. Sattvic food is that which is pure, clean, and wholesome. A sattvic diet is food that gives life, strength, energy, courage, and self-command. In other words, sattvic food gives us more than the gross physical requirements of the right mix of proteins, carbs, and fats, etc. It also gives us subtle nourishment for our vitality and consciousness. Food is seen as a carrier of the life-force called prana. Food is judged by the quality of its prana and by the effect it has on our consciousness.

These are important considerations in the practice of yoga. Yoga is defined as those practices that lead to “anushasanam”, that is the governing (shasan) of the subtle nature (anu). (Yoga Sutras 1:1) The goal of yoga is described as “chitta vritti nirodha”, the quieting of the mind-field (YS 1:2). Yoga practitioners advocate the use of the sattvic diet to support these subtle aims.

A beginning practice in both Ayurveda and yoga is to simply observe the effect of each food choice we make. From our experience and awareness, we can begin to make small changes. As we progress in this practice, we can recognize three broad categories called the gunas. Some foods leave us feeling tired and sluggish. This is called the tamasic effect. Other foods leave us feeling agitated or over-stimulated. This is the rajasic effect. The third category belongs to foods that leave us feeling calm, alert, and refreshed. This is the sattvic effect and the basis of the sattvic diet.

If we persist in this practice, we will arrive at our personal version of the sattvic diet. The Bhagavad Gita describes the sattvic diet as “promoting life, virtue, strength, health, happiness and satisfaction.” (Bhagavad Gita XVII:8) Sattvic foods are “savory, smooth, firm, and pleasant to the stomach.” (BG XVII:8). By contrast the Gita describes the rajasic diet as “excessively pungent, sour, salty, hot, harsh, astringent, and burnt,” leading to “pain, misery, and sickness.” (BG XVII:9) The tamasic foods are described as “stale, tasteless, smelly, left-over, rotten, and foul.” (BG XVII:10)

The true test of our foods comes when we meditate. All meditators know that there are two main problems. One is falling asleep. This is the tamasic effect. The other is an over-active mind. This is the rajasic effect. If we want to be able to quiet the mind and maintain our alertness to explore our subtle nature, we need to follow the sattvic diet. “When sattva predominates, the light of wisdom shines through every gate of the body.” (BG XIV: 11)

Although it has been suggested that one can arrive at the sattvic diet through trial and error, it can be most helpful to consider what other practitioners have described as the sattvic diet.

In general, the sattvic diet consists of pure foods which are rich in prana. Organic foods are therefore recommended for both their purity and vitality. The food should be fresh and freshly prepared. Leftovers are decidedly tamasic. There are some exceptions, but most people understand that if you make a beautiful meal one day and feel great from it, that is no guarantee that you’ll get the same effect or pleasure the next day.

Sattvic foods are light (as opposed to heavy) in nature, easy to digest, mildly cooling, refreshing, and not disturbing to the mind. They are best prepared with love and awareness. On this last point, please note that you can take the best food, but if it is prepared or eaten in anger, it will have a disturbing effect. The subtle nature of the food is affected by our emotions and vice-versa. That being said, you can sometimes take less than pure food and bless it to overcome its impurities. Yes, our food affects our mind, but our mind, or what we hold in our mind, also affects our food. The idea ultimately is to absorb that which is nourishing and eliminate that which is not.

Pure sattvic food needs to be chewed carefully and eaten in modest portions. Overeating is definitely tamasic. The food should be enjoyed for its inherent taste and quality, not for the amount of spices and seasonings that are added. Too much salt and spice have a rajasic effect. “When rajas predominates, a person runs about pursuing selfish and greedy ends, driven by restlessness and desire.” (BG XIV: 12) The idea, rather, is to refine the sense of taste. This leads to increased pleasure. Indulging

oneself in strong flavors fuels desire and leads to over-satiation, the loss of taste and the loss of pleasure.

**Fresh Organic Fruits:** Most fruits, including apples, apricots, bananas, berries, dates, grapes, melons, lemons, mangoes, oranges, peaches and plums are considered especially sattvic. Sometimes yogi's go on fruit fasts when doing a special sadhana, an advanced practice, or have undertaken a vow. Fruit is also considered symbolic of generosity and spirituality and is often exchanged as an offering or a gift. Three dried fruits known as triphala are used to keep the digestive system operating optimally.

**Fresh Organic Dairy:** Dairy is considered controversial these days, but the yoga tradition insists on the value of a wholesome food freely given by the symbol of motherhood, the cow. We need to use the highest quality organic fresh dairy to benefit from its sattvic qualities. Milk, butter, clarified butter (ghee), fresh home-made cheese (paneer), whey, and fresh yogurt (especially lassi) are all recommended. They benefit from careful preparation, and the extra effort to learn the recipes is well worthwhile. For example, milk can be diluted and warmed with mild spices (i.e., fresh ginger, cinnamon and cardamom) and served with raw honey to overcome any mucus-forming tendencies. Traditionally, if a yogi is doing advanced practices, the dairy provides needed lubrication, grounding and nourishment. In fact, dairy along with fruit have been described as the epitome of the sattvic or yogic diet.

**Nuts, Seeds, and Oils:** Fresh nuts and seeds that haven't been overly roasted and salted are good additions to the sattvic diet in small portions. Good choices are almonds (especially when peeled and soaked in water overnight), coconut, pine nuts, walnuts, sesame seeds, pumpkin seeds and flax seeds. Oils should be of highest quality and cold-pressed. Good choices are olive oil, sesame oil, and flax oil.

**Organic Vegetables:** Most mild organic vegetables are considered sattvic, such as beets, carrots, celery, cucumbers, green leafy vegetables, sweet potatoes and squash. Pungent vegetables like hot peppers, garlic, and onion are excluded, as are gas-forming vegetables like mushrooms and potatoes. They are considered rajasic and tamasic respectively. Sometimes, the short-comings of these foods can be overcome by careful preparation. An excellent practice is to drink freshly made vegetable juices for their prana, live enzymes, and easy absorption.

**Whole Grains:** Whole grains provide excellent nourishment when well cooked. Consider organic rice, whole wheat, spelt, oatmeal, and barley. Sometimes the grains are lightly roasted before cooking to remove some of their heavy quality. Yeasted breads are not recommended unless toasted. Wheat and other grains can be sprouted before cooking as well. Favorite preparations are kicharee (basmati rice cooked with split mung beans, ghee, and mild spices), kheer (rice cooked with milk and sweetened), chapathis (non-leavened whole wheat flat bread), porridge (sometimes made very watery and cooked with herbs), and "Bible" bread (sprouted grain bread). Sometimes yogis will fast from grains during special practices.

**Legumes:** Split mung beans, yellow split peas, organic tofu, bean sprouts and perhaps lentils and aduki beans are considered sattvic if well prepared. In general, the smaller the bean, the easier to digest. Strategies include splitting, peeling, grinding, soaking, sprouting, cooking, and spicing. Legumes combined with whole grains offer a complete protein combination.

**Sweeteners:** Yogi's use raw honey (especially in combination with dairy) and raw sugar (not refined) in small quantities.

**Spices:** Sattvic spices are the mild spices including basil, cardamom, cinnamon, coriander, cumin, fennel, fenugreek, fresh ginger and turmeric. Rajasic spices like black pepper, red pepper and garlic are normally excluded, but are sometimes used in small amounts to keep the channels open (rajas is used to counter tamas). But beware, taking rajasic spices with tamasic food does not equal sattwa. A teacher once said you are more likely to fall asleep and have restless dreams.

**Supplemental Protein:** Yogi's are advised not to indulge in flesh foods. It is said that the fear and anger of the animal being killed is transferred to the person eating the flesh. Fresh meat is considered rajasic, and old meat is considered tamasic. Another approach is to avoid the flesh of mammals, especially if one is using dairy products. How can one eat the flesh of one's (symbolic) mother? This approach allows for some high-quality fish, poultry, or eggs. Even then it is recommended to abstain from flesh foods a minimum of three days a week with at least two prolonged periods of abstention from all animal foods every year. Purists rely on dairy for supplemental protein as it is given freely and is considered non-harming.

One problem of the vegetarian diet is that it can become too cooling. For this reason, yogis of the Tibetan plateau sometimes include meat for warmth. One can also learn to promote bodily warmth through yoga practices centered on the navel region. An ayurvedic approach is to include warming and strengthening herbs in the diet like ashwagandha, astragalus or ginseng. Special combinations include masalas (based on cumin seed, coriander seed, and turmeric root), hingashtak, draksha and chyavanprash. There are also mineral and ash preparations used called bhasmas. One that is favored in the Himalayas to keep the body warm in cold weather is a preparation of deer antler called sring bhasma.

**Sattvic Herbs:** Other herbs are used to directly support the mind and meditation. These include ashwagandha, bacopa, calamus, gotu kola, ginkgo, jatamansi, purnarnava, shatavari, shankhapushpi, tulsi, saffron and rose.

According to the Charak Samhita, one of the classic textbooks of Ayurveda, “The persons having the sattvic essence are endowed with memory, devotion, are grateful, learned, pure, courageous, skillful, resolute, free from anxiety, having well-directed and serious intellect and activities and are engaged in virtuous acts.” (CS III-8:110)

The ultimate goal of yoga is to pass beyond even sattva however. The Gita tells us “...they are unmoved by the harmony of sattva, the activity of rajas, or the delusion of tamas. They feel no aversion when these forces are active, nor do they crave for them when these forces subside. They remain impartial, undisturbed by the action of the gunas. Knowing that it is the gunas which act, they abide within themselves and do not vacillate. Established within themselves, they are equal in pleasure and pain, praise and blame, kindness and unkindness. Clay, a rock, and gold are the same to them. Alike in honor and dishonor, alike to friend and foe, they have given up every selfish pursuit. Such are those who have gone beyond the gunas.” (BG XIV: 22-25)

#### Suggested Readings:

Robert Svoboda: The Hidden Secret of Ayurveda  
The Bhagavad Gita