

Food Sadhana: Part 3 of 4

Expanding Mindfulness

by Gary Gran, CYT, D Ay.

In Part 1 of this series, we explored the benefits and practice of mindful eating. This time we will expand our mindful eating practice to include all five stages of the nourishment cycle. They are procurement, preparation, eating, digestion and elimination.

Procurement: Over the passage of time, procurement of food has evolved from simple gathering and hunting, to growing, manufacturing and retailing food as the end product of an industrialized food chain. We may have no idea where our food comes from or the conditions under which it was grown or processed.

A direct way to practice mindfulness of procurement is to grow some of our own food and watch it come into being. This deepens our appreciation of the life-giving power of nature and provides us with the freshest possible food. Ayurveda advocates choosing fresh foods to maximize prana, the life force.

Another method is to procure our food from local providers. In this way, we can develop a mutually supportive and mindful relationship with those who grow our food. Sometimes it's possible to visit their farms and gardens so we can see first hand the conditions under which the food is grown. Ideally, the providers demonstrate their own mindfulness and concern regarding the health of the soil, plants and animals under their care.

The industrialized food chain has been criticized for using violent and unnatural methods including poisons in the form of pesticides, additives in the form of preservatives, genetically modified seeds, etc. Ayurveda warns us that we receive the negative fruits of these unwholesome actions when we eat these types of foods.

Instead, we are advised to procure natural, wholesome, fresh and pure foods. We recommend using seasonal, fresh, locally sourced and organically certified foods as much as possible, staying informed on your food sources, and learning to read the labels on packaged products.

Preparation: Ayurveda recommends preparing food with love. Our love will then pass to those who eat the food. To do this we must make an effort to remain mindful of our own thoughts and mood when preparing food. We first notice our mood without judgment. Then we introduce the intention of being loving. This becomes our focus.

Conversely, Ayurveda tells us that even the best quality food can become poison when prepared in anger. Or, if we ever have the chance to observe a kitchen staff during a retreat or at a restaurant, notice their mood while preparing the food. Then notice the mood of the dining room after the meal is served. We may be surprised to find a direct correlation.

Eating: Before eating, remember with gratitude all the elements that are coming together at that moment as in this traditional Zen reflection:

“This food is the gift of the entire universe- the sun, the earth, the rains and the work of many hands.

May we eat in mindfulness so as to be worthy to receive it.”

It may also be helpful to become aware of outer cues that may encourage over-eating. Swami Veda Bharati once said: “Your problem in America is big cups and bowls.” Big cups, large portions, fast music and bright colors may unconsciously stimulate us into over-indulging. So take a few moments to relax your body, slow the breath, and calm your mind. Once settled, begin eating mindfully, being aware of each bite or sip.

Digestion: Ayurveda teaches that digestion proceeds in three stages. We are advised to practice mindfulness of each stage to notice our tendencies to fall out of balance. These tendencies are called doshas and there is one dosha for each stage of digestion.

The first stage of digestion begins with tasting the food and ends with the food in the stomach. If we notice a heavy feeling in the stomach, excess mucus or phlegm, nausea or gagging, we have developed kapha dosha. We can then make

adjustments to our food choices and eating habits until these symptoms clear up. This usually means avoiding too much of any one thing, not falling into patterns or ruts and eating less food less often.

The second stage of digestion begins about an hour after eating when food passes from the stomach and travels through the small intestine. If we experience excess heat, heartburn, acid reflux, itching, pimples or a rash we have developed pitta dosha. By noticing the inter-connection between our food choices, our eating habits and our heartburn we are developing the fruit of mindfulness practice - wisdom. We learn that we benefit from moderation and eating calmly with thankfulness, rather than analyzing or criticizing our food.

The third stage of digestion lasts from about two to five hours after eating when food passes from the small intestine and travels through the large intestine. If we experience excess gas, bloating, twitching and restlessness we have a classic case of vata dosha. We will benefit from avoiding mindless eating and by eating smaller portions on a regular schedule.

Elimination: Being mindful of our elimination will also reveal clues as to the state of our doshas. Constipation with gas is the hallmark of vata dosha. Burning diarrhea is the sign of pitta dosha. Watery stools with mucus are the signs of kapha dosha.

Perhaps the most important mindfulness practice that follows eating is to simply notice the effect of each meal on our mental state using the three gunas - tamas, rajas and sattva - as a gauge. If the meal makes us feel tired and sluggish it is called tamas. If the meal makes our mind race and we feel distracted and unable to focus, it is called rajas. Ideally our mind feels refreshed, clear and bright. This is sattva.

To sum up, the practice of mindful eating can be expanded to include all that has come before the meal and all that will come after. By expanding our focus in this way, we can develop greater insight into our health and well-being. Or, as said by Thich Nhat Hanh: “When practiced to its fullest, mindful eating turns a simple meal into a spiritual experience, giving us a deep appreciation of all that went into the meal’s creation as well a deep understanding of the relationship between the food on our table, our own health, and our planet’s health.”

Suggested Readings:

Swami Veda Bharati: Whole Hearted: Applied Spirituality for Everyday Life

Thich Nhat Hanh: How to Eat

David Frawley: Yoga & Ayurveda