



“All food is medicine, all medicine is food.”

Āyurveda was the one of the first medical systems to realise the crucial importance of the kind of food we eat and to appreciate the interaction between health and disease, disease and food, and food and health. It will be from this point that this article will explore the question of diet by examining the concepts of elements and taste in food.

YOGA AND INDIAN THOUGHT

A concept integral to Indian thought is the Triguna (three qualities) and their effect on the macrocosm and microcosm or the Universal Cosmos and the Individual Cosmos.

The Yoga Sūtra tells us that we have something in us called Citta (Psyche). The psyche is subject to change or movement known as Pariṇāma. This change can bring with it suffering or Duḥkha.

This suffering can be firstly because all things are impermanent and are constantly changing, including our own body and all our inner and outer relationships. Even the god Brahma is said to be within an age span.

Secondly, we will experience Tāpa or physical and mental pain in our lives.

Thirdly, the notion of Saṃskāra or habits in that we are used to certain things and can't do without them. We become conditioned to certain habits or comfortable grooves. When we can't continue in them because of change, we suffer. Even if the change is the right one and will lead to a better awareness we would rather stay in the comfortable groove even knowing it to be a negative pattern.

An example of this could be taking time to practise and the patterning of the psyche compelling us to find other activities or in-activities to fill the time. We can make a career out of finding a myriad of ways of staying too busy to make time for ourselves.

As well as the three types of Duḥkha there is a further influence, either within or outside of the individual. This is a constant change due to the interplay of the Triguna.

In fact Yoga states that all matter originates from and evolves because of the Triguna. (See Āyurveda and Yoga Part 2).

Guṇa is a Saṃskṛta word meaning quality. There are three qualities:

- 1) Sattva – The quality of clarity or lightness. It is lightness in the body and psyche. It is that which illuminates or is illuminating.
- 2) Rajas – the quality of movement or activity. It is that which is stimulating physically and mentally. That which activates and makes the system excited.
- 3) Tamas – The quality of restraint and obscurity. It is that which makes us unaware of what is happening within or around us. It is that which envelops and obscures as in deep sleep (Tamo Nidrā).

There is also an impression in some schools that Rajas and Tamas are to be rejected. This is not so, both are necessary. It is the combination that is important.

There is the simile of an oil lamp in the Sāṃkhya Kārikā verse 13:

*“The Triguna are like a lamp with a wick, oil and a bowl.
The bowl is heavy and represents Tamas.
The oil is fluid and represents Rajas.
The wick has the potential for light and represents Sattva.
Thus the Guṇa have to work together to produce a flame.”*

So in cultivating Sattva, understanding the nature of Rajas and Tamas is important and although different they work in intimacy. One predominates over another, first dominating then being dominated. What our practice must promote is a balance where if the Guṇa of activity predominates we can act with clarity rather than an action arising out of agitation or a sense of obscurity.

Or, if the Guṇa of obscurity predominates, we can explore how to at least support it with clarity, rather than act in a dull and closed manner. According to Yoga one who has mastered themselves is one who can transform the psyche to whatever Guṇa is required.

One’s own actions can develop or make one Guṇa prominent. Thus we can plan or practise Āsana and Prāṇāyāma to promote one Guṇa. Even Mantra can be classified into Guṇa and this needs to be considered when proposing Mantra for the individual. So for Yoga teachers it is important to understand the movements of the psyche as well as of the body.

The movement of the Guṇa can also be influenced by the food you eat. As is the food so is your mind – this means, “You are what you eat”.

This is why Yoga texts like the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā refer in the first chapter to the effect of food on one’s psychic equilibrium. Even a Hindu text like the Bhagavad Gītā refers in the seventeenth chapter to the type of food appropriate for one who seeks to serve God. Here the argument is presented that you may come to know who you are by the type of food you are drawn to.

Thus we must also reflect on the notion that “You eat what you are”.

ĀYURVEDA AND FOOD

Of all the advice, direction and details on herbs, surgery and healing offered in Āyurveda most emphasis is placed on diet. Āyurveda teaches us to nourish ourselves by coming to understand our body and its needs.

We have seen from the last article that the body is derived from food, contributing to the various tissue elements that make up the individual. Going on further food should be chosen according to the individual constitution, the time of the day, the time of the year and the likely effect of the food.

In ancient times Āyurveda examined every ‘thing’ that could be ‘consumed’, and classified them all according to their effects on the body and energy processes and where they could be helpful or harmful.

This analysis even included various types of flesh, for instance comparing the meat of animals which are born or who move in water and marshy land with those who are born or move in desert or dry land.

We might compare the meat of duck with that of chicken and its effect on our anabolic and metabolic processes. Various types of milk are compared such as sheep, goat, cow and buffalo and different properties were attributed to each.

From this analysis all foods, herbs, drugs and minerals were seen to have a certain property, as if a medicine, and when chosen for a certain constitution exerted a beneficial effect on the health and energy processes of the individual.

This gives us our fourth axiom of Āyurveda:

“All food is medicine, all medicine is food”.

Here we must be reminded that even the most beneficial of foods can bring about disturbance if it is consumed with no respect for the rules of eating. Also too much of one type of food can bring about an increase in the energetic imbalance of the individual.

Āyurveda classifies each food according to its tendency to increase or decrease one or more of the three principles or Tridoṣa.

There are five main concepts to understanding the likely effect of a particular food:

- 1) Dravya or Substance – The elemental composition.
- 2) Rasa or Taste – The defining taste property or “taste”.
- 3) Vīrya or Property – The subsequent effect or “temperature”.
- 4) Vipāka or Effect – The post-digestive effect.
- 5) Prabhāva or Special Effect – Special effect or action.

FOOD AND DRAVYA OR SUBSTANCE

Everything and anything is composed of Pañcabhūta or the five elements (For more on the Pañcabhūta refer to Āyurveda and Yoga Part 3). So also a disease is not based on one thing and we cannot call a disease Vāta, Pitta or Kapha alone.

Any substance is made out of the five elements, the base for which is earth and the source is water. So a substance cannot exist without the help of the elements of earth and water. The other three elements provide differences in shape and divergency.

FOOD AND RASA OR TASTE

So with taste, the quality of taste was first created in water. Water and earth are the two elements that incorporate taste. The varied character found in taste is due to fire, air, and ether. Thus all tastes are caused by the combination of the five gross elements.

Caraka Saṃhitā, Sūtrasthāna 1:64:

“Water and earth constitute the sub stratum for the manifestation of taste which is the object of the gustatory sense organ. As to specific qualities of taste the three (fire, air and ether) are responsible”.

The element of water is the basis for the sensory experience of taste. The tongue must be wet in order to taste as substance. When taking food its first interaction with the body is in the mouth where it is tasted by the tongue.

Āyurveda recognises six tastes, namely; sweet, saline or salty, sour, pungent, bitter and astringent. Each of these tastes is derived from a combination of two elements. These are illustrated in the chart below:

Rasa/Taste	Dravya/Substance
Sweet	Earth/Water
Salty	Water/Fire
Sour	Earth/Fire
Pungent	Fire/Air
Bitter	Air/Ether
Astringent	Air/Earth

We can see that there is more than one substance or element in a taste. Also there is more than one taste in a substance, however one predominates and is identifiable, others follow later (Anurasa).

The action of each taste is indicated as a guide. This can be further linked to the dominant Principle (See Āyurveda and Yoga Part 4 for a more detailed explanation of the properties of each Principle).

RASA OR TASTE AND DOṢA OR PRINCIPLE

Taking the link between taste and Principle in more detail.

Of the six tastes, the first three, sweet, salty, and sour cause a natural increase in the Water Principle in the body and naturally decrease the Air Principle.

The last three, pungent, bitter and astringent have exactly the opposite effect, increasing Air and decreasing Water.

Pungent, sour and salty increase Fire, and sweet, bitter and astringent decrease it.

To help our understanding of the relationship between the three principles and the six tastes a chart is presented based on a verse from the Caraka Saṃhitā, Vimānasthāna 1:6:

	Doṣa/Principle Vāta/Air	Doṣa/Principle Pitta/Fire	Doṣa/Principle Kapha/Water
Aggravating Tastes Causing Increase of Action	Pungent Bitter Astringent	Pungent Sour Salty	Sweet Sour Salty
Alleviating Tastes Causing Decrease of Action	Sweet Sour Salty	Sweet Bitter Astringent	Pungent Bitter Astringent

Thus people of Vāta or Air constitution should avoid bitter, pungent and astringent substances in excess that increase Air.

Substances containing sweet, sour and salty tastes are good for individuals of Vāta constitution.

People of Pitta or Fire constitution should avoid an excess sour, salty and pungent substances that aggravate bodily fire.

However, sweet, bitter and astringent tastes are beneficial for individuals of a Pitta constitution.

Kapha or Water individuals should avoid an excess of foods containing sweet, sour and salty tastes for they increase bodily water. So a person whose constitution has a predominance of say Water or, who is suffering from a disease produced by excessive Water, must avoid food which tastes of sweet, sour and salty until their natural balance is restored.

To help they should choose food with pungent, bitter and astringent tastes. These tastes will increase the activity of the Air Principle and the property of Air will bring about a reduction of the Water Principle.

SUMMARY

Modern nutritional science classifies food, depending upon their chemical composition, as carbohydrates, protein, fat and oils, vitamins and minerals.

In Āyurveda the classification is based upon the biological action of the food and its taste. This action is then related to the energetic constitution of a particular individual. Depending on the action of the food and the physiological and psychological temperament of the individual choices and suggestions are possible to help with reducing disease and maintaining health.

Take for example someone in whom the principle of Pitta or fire predominates, their constitution tends to be fiery, they “burn” a lot, don’t put on weight and lose weight easily because their catabolic and metabolic processes are strong. They are often warm, can be overactive and have light sleeping patterns.

They can have a tendency to digestive inflammatory conditions and loose bowel movements. (Refer to constitution chart in Āyurveda and Yoga Part 5).

If we look at foods to avoid we will see that the tastes of salty, acid and pungent stimulate and increase the principle of Fire. Therefore foods with this taste should be limited.

Hence the fourth axiom of Āyurveda “All food is medicine, all medicine is food”. This could be further supplemented by advice on reducing physical activity and taking more rest.

This is a very simple example that serves to illustrate the insight of Āyurveda into food and the individual. An Āyurveda doctor would take a very detailed consultation looking at food likes/dislikes, mental reactions, personal habits, pulse patterns and the life history of the individual.

With that in mind these articles can serve as an introduction to the science of Āyurveda. The next article will continue with the question of diet by examining the remaining concepts in the list of the five primary ones mentioned earlier in this article.

These are Vīrya or Property, the subsequent effect or “temperature”; Vipāka or Effect, the post-digestive effect and Prabhāva or special effects or actions. We will look at the inherent quality of temperature, post-digestive and special effects within various foods.

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