

A Critical Review of the Principles Governing Diet Intake in Ayurveda

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Abstract

Diet has been given very crucial importance in Ayurveda regarding maintenance of health and causation of diseases. A lot of description about what to eat and how to eat has been given in the texts. This article discusses the rules for deciding the food for an individual and eating the food as given in Ayurveda in the light of scientific knowledge.

Keywords: Ahara, Diet, Rules, Healthy life, Food, Digestion.

Introduction

Ayurveda considers *Ahara* as very crucial element for the maintenance of life and hence it has been included in the three *Upastambhas* or the three sub-pillars for life sustenance along with sleep and abstinence. Considering its importance and keeping in view its dependence on the *agni* status, it has been described to be decided, in relation to the *Prakriti* and the health or the diseased status of the individual as well as the qualities of the food product itself. Various general principles have also been described in a scattered form in the *Ayurvedic* texts, which describe the basic rules regarding the consumption of food. Here we will discuss about the general principles of dietetic rules for eating the food and evaluate their scientific role in day-to-day life.

Ashta Ahara Vidhi Visheshayaytana

*Charaka*¹ has described eight factors, which govern the ultimate effect of food intake in the body as:

Prakriti (nature of the food article)

One should consider the nature of food article being consumed in terms of its properties such as its *Rasa*, *Guna* (also includes *Guru* and *Laghu* properties of *Ahara* which pertains to its digestibility), *Veerya*, *Vipaka*, *Prabhava* and judge its suitability for the person consuming them. For a simple example, take rice – newly harvested rice is *guru*, while that which is older than a year is *laghu*. So an article should be consumed only after assessing its suitability for the person.

Karana (method of processing the food)

Method of processing of the food has also been given due consideration in Ayurveda and the same is also present even today in the various Indian styles of cooking. A single food article by the various ways of its preparation will provide different effects in the body. For an example take rice - Rice cooked without taking out *Manda* (the starch-containing portion of rice obtained when rice is cooked in greater amount of water) is heavy to digest while the one with *Manda* removed, is light to digest. Similarly the different other preparations of rice as *Lai* (*Kheel*), rice flour and *Chuda* have different properties in terms of digestion and their effect on the body. Similarly, *Dahi* is *Ushna* and *Guru*, *Abhishyandi* in nature, but if in the context of processing, we churn it and remove the butter portion and add *Trikatu*, *Jeera*, salt or sugar to it-its property will change every time. Therefore, we can say that the processing of food was considered as a very important tool for the addition and subtraction of the desired qualities in any given food to make it wholesome for the person.

Samyoga (combination)

The combination of one food to other also imparts various qualities to the resultant food, which either may be the additives of the combined ones or may be entirely new ones. *Sattu* told to be taken with only salt and water is *Ruksha*, *Laghu* and *Karshaka*, but to that in which sugar is added turns *Snigdha*, *Guru* and *Tarpaka*. Here a person should also keep in mind the compatibility of the food items being combined in terms of the principles of *Virruddha Ahara*.

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Rashi (food quantity)

In addition to the above properties, due consideration should also be given to the quantity of the food consumed in terms of its properties as well as the *Agni* and the health or diseased status of the individual.

Desha (habitat)

The habitat of the food items imparts its qualities in the food article in terms of its contents, their proportions and percentage. The principle in Ayurveda states that food articles and drugs native to the place of birth and living of an individual are naturally suited to him. Therefore, a person should judge the place of origin of the food article to know about its suitability. For example, the meats of various animals may be considered here-meat of aquatic animals is very different in property and constituents from that of animals living in plains or in marshy areas; thus, before consuming any food article, an enquiry about the origin of the food should be made.

Kala (time)

It refers to the time of the year. It is of two types- *Nityaga* (which expects the compatibility to *Ritu*) and *Avasthika* (which requires the wholesomeness to the status of the person - healthy or the diseased) and the diet should be ascertained according to the following rules:

Upayoga Sanstha (rules governing the intake of food)

Various rules have been described in the Ayurvedic texts which should be followed for the intake of food and for its digestion. Further, they will be described in detail.

Upayokta (wholesomeness to the individual taking it)

Besides considering all the above stated factors a person should finally check for the suitability and wholesomeness of a given food article to his own health. For example, milk is considered as the best *Jivaniya* substance, and this milk even if is having all the good properties, is suited by combination, Desha etc. for the people in a particular area, still, it's not suitable for a person who is intolerant to milk or a *Kushthi* (*Kaphaja* especially) even of that area.

Sushrutokta Dwadasha Ashana Pravichara

Sushruta after describing the *Ritucharya* has described about *Dwadasha Ashana Pravichara*²

stating that the *Ritucharya* should be followed keeping in mind the following *Dwadasha Ashana Pravichara*. *Pravichara* means the things, which should be considered before eating by both the healthy, as well as the diseased person. The factors stated are:

Sheeta Anna Upayoga (Usage of cold food substances)

Here we can see that contrary to the *Charakokta* principle of *Ushnama Ashniyata*, here consumption of cold foods has been advised, but this advice is conditioned, only for those who are suffering from *Trishna* (thirst), *Daha* (heat), *Mada* (intoxication), *Daha* (burning sensation), *Stri* (females), *Murchha* (comatose), *Rakta pitta* (bleeding diathesis), *Visha* (poisons) and are *Ksheena* (weak). In such kind of people, taking of warm and hot foods will not be beneficial as all these conditions are predominated by *Pitta Dosha*.

Ushna Anna Upayoga (Usage of hot food substances)

A person suffering from *Vataja* and *Kaphaja* disorders, one who has consumed *Sneha*, *Virikta* (one who has taken the body purifying practices) and the person who doesn't have *Kleda* in one's body should indulge in the consumption of hot food items. Hot food items will pacify and resolve the problems in the above stated people and will be wholesome to them.

Snigdha Anna Upayoga (Usage of unctuous food substances)

A *Vatika Prakriti* person, one who has excessive dryness in the body, a person who has indulged in excessive physical exercise or sexual practices should habitually consume unctuous food substances.

Ruksha Anna Upayoga (Usage of un-unctuous food substances)

Persons having excessive unctuousness in the body or excessive fatty tissue (obese), persons suffering from various *Pramehas* (urinary disorders) and having *Kapha* predominant body should indulge in the consumption of un-unctuous food items.

Drava Anna Upayoga (Usage of predominantly liquid food substances)

People afflicted with thirst, having dry- ununctuous body and weak people should use liquid food articles predominantly.

Shushka Anna Upayoga (Usage of dry food substances)

People having excessive *Kleda* in the body, *Vrani* (wounded person) and those suffering from various types of *Pramehas* should use dry food substances regularly.

Eka Kala Anna Upayoga (Usage of food substances only once)

Food should be taken only once by those who are themselves weak or have a weak *agni* (digestive strength) because such kind of habit will increase their digestive strength.

Dwi Kala Anna Upayoga (Usage of food substances twice)

Proper *Agni* status requires the consumption of food twice for its maintenance.

Aushadha Yukta Anna Upayoga (Usage of food substances with medicine)

People who don't like to take medicines should be given medicine mixed with the food so that they may take the medicine also along with the food, which is a necessity for such person.

Matra Heena Anna Upayoga (Usage of food substances in reduced amount)

Persons having reduced strength of *Agni* or the digestive power should take food in decreased amount, so that it may get digested properly.

Dosha Prashamana Anna Upayoga (Usage of food substances which ameliorate the doshas)

Food according to the *Ritu* (season) is considered as the *Dosha Prashamana Ahara*.

Vriyarthana Anna Upayoga (Usage of food substances for nourishing the body)

Food taken to maintain and nourish the body is considered under this heading.

Discussion

The eight principles given by *Charaka* have been told to assess the quality of the food item and decide the food suitable for an individual. Here, we see that a lot of emphasis has been given on the quality of the food items, their place of origin and production, their method of preparation, their combinations with other food items as well as their compatibility and

incompatibility to the individual upon combination, effect of time period on the food items and above all the consideration of the person for whom the food is going to be used.

All the twelve considerations described by *Sushruta* are the specifications of special dietetic emphasis, which should be followed by a special group of people. They are in no way contraindication to the *Charakokta* principles. They are just stating the clear indication of the food type, which is to be taken by a particular group of people, in context to their digestion capacity and for bringing wholesomeness to the health of the individual.

If we interpret these aspects, in terms of researches conducted now, we see that no attention has been given to the ease and time of digestion. Their main role of focus in these researches is on the glycemic index of foods. Some of the studies quote that the method of processing of the food may bring the possibility of improving food properties.³ That study has also quoted that the metabolic responses to starch in cereal and legume products are greatly affected by food structure. This concept supported by their studies is much similar to our understanding of the *Samskara* or the processing of food.

Similarly, the modern science also accepts that the composition of all the foods varies in terms of their carbohydrate, protein, fat, vitamin, mineral and water content and so their pace of digestion in the body will vary.

Further, it is true that our method of cooking of food also modifies their properties. Practically, we all have seen that there is difference in the digestion time of the same materials which are cooked on gas or by the conventional cooking method and microwave food processed in little amount of oil; which also proves our concept of *Sanskara*.

Our *Acharyas* were also very scientific in explaining the rules of consuming food⁴ in which they have described that one should consume freshly prepared, hot, unctuous food which is good in potency, having no harmful combination, in a place which is suited to him, with all the required materials as glass, plate, spoon etc, sitting properly, in a way which is neither too fast nor too slow, without talking, laughing or focusing elsewhere, concentrating only on the food, only when the prior taken food is digested.

Conclusion

The principles stated above are the ones, which are followed even today in the rules for eating the food properly and all are scientific. All these ensure that

the food taken is properly chewed and digested; it does not get in the respiratory tract and gives fulfillment to the individual. Even the modern scientists have accepted importance of chewing the food well due to its role in helping the digestion process. Due consideration has also been given to the pace of eating food – if a person eats too fast, the satiety centre will saturate later, hence overeating will occur; while at the other end if the person eats too slowly his satiety centre will saturate early, thus providing under nutrition. Similarly, the role of psychological factors especially stress in hampering the digestion process is a well-documented fact by the modern scientists. So, we can very well appreciate the efficacy of “*Tanmana Bhunjeeta, Atmaanam abhisameekshya Samyaka*” meaning one should eat focusing on the food only while at the same time assessing the self. This will aid digestion and prevent over and under eating and nutrition. So we can see that the principles of Ayurveda were very scientific. Science and our daily experiences have proved some of them. Only some of the aspects are awaiting acceptance by the modern world in scientific terms.

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