

## MANAGEMENT OF OBESITY THROUGH YOGIC DIET

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### ABSTRACT

*On the name of modern culture we are striving to follow unnatural life style and unknowingly acquiring highly disastrous habits. One of such habits is related to food that becomes the cause of obesity and other related problems. Food plays an important role for healthy life and living. It is said as we eat so we develop our thought and behaviour. In this article an effort has been made to understand concept of Yogic Diet, in general, and management of obesity through yogic diet, in particular*

**Key words:** āhāra, mitāhāra, yuktāhāravihāra, obesity.

### Introduction:

Ancient and Classical Literature on Yoga provides a golden rule to mankind – “Excess of anything is bad” and “Moderation in everything is good”- for healthy life and living. If we follow this rule in our day today life with regard to food, sleep, recreation etc. then there is seldom any health hazard. This aspect we all know but it is said that **there is a difference between knowing the path and walking on the path**. Human being is said to be the best creation on this earth because of the ability to choose. However, we misuse this ability rather than using it properly thereby we become the victim of several psycho-somatic disorders. **Obesity** is one of such disorders which can affect at any age. Modern society is the worst example in this regard - which has really misguided itself on the name of modern culture wherein the concept of fast food is very much prevalent. All human values are losing their meaning and every person is striving to follow this unnatural modern lifestyle blindly and is unknowingly acquiring highly disastrous habits. One of such habits is related to ‘**Atyāhāra**’ i.e. **over eating** that becomes one of the causes of Obesity besides many other factors. In this article an effort has been made to understand the concept of Yogic Diet, in general, and management of obesity through yogic diet, in particular.

### Factors causing Obesity

**Atyāhāra** i.e. overeating and lack of exercise are the main factors for obesity. However, overeating may be due to stress, mental and emotional disturbances with a view to release them, sedentary life style with fast food habits. Genetic factor, temptation to eat when there is no hunger. Menstrual disturbances may cause obesity. Obesity, in turn, becomes the cause of various other disorders such as heart problem, hypertension, diabetes and arthritis etc.

Yoga takes care of all such problems in general and obesity in particular as it has tremendous potential to prevent and treat this problem of obesity, Yoga shows us the door but unless and until we walk through it every

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statement mentioned below will remain sheer imagination . We can develop the wisdom of our body-mind complex through yoga only if we live these concepts in our day-to-day life.

### Material and Methods

For this study following traditional texts have been reviewed critically and compared with dietary guidelines followed by modern dieticians:

1. Bhagavatgītā (B.G.), 2. Chāndogyaopaniṣad (Ch.up.), 3. Taitriyopaniṣad (Tai.up.), 4. Haṭhapradīpikā (H.P), 5. Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā (G.S.), 6. Śiva Saṃhitā (S.S.), 7. Yogopaniṣad and aṣṭāṅgayoga of Cāraṇadāsa.

### Scheme of Presentation:

- I. General Understanding of Diet
- II. Concept of Yogic Diet, in general, *Mitāhāra*, in particular.
- III. How do we digest the Food that we consume? Traditional understanding.
- IV. Management of obesity through Yogic Diet:
  - a. When to eat?
  - b. How to eat?
  - c. How much to eat
  - d. 'What' and 'what not' to eat?
- V. Food and Thought
- VI. Conclusion

### I. General understanding of Diet

At the outset let me make it clear that there is a lot of difference in the eastern and western concept of diet since there is great difference in Eastern and Western life style, values, habits and thinking etc. Westerners are more concerned with the nutritive value of the food that they consume and the food items are analyzed on the basis of Protein, Carbohydrate, Fat and Vitamin etc. The balanced diet is decided on the basis of the quantity of these values which can be increased or decreased depending upon the needs of an individual. Unfortunately, no thought has been given on sources of the food items, since no food item is prohibited to them. Therefore, it can be stated that Western dieticians have focused their attention mainly on physical health. Effect of food on mind and behaviour of an individual has not given much importance.

### II. Concept of Yogic Diet, in general, *Mitāhāra*, in particular.

According to Yoga food is considered as Brahma ['अन्नं वै ब्रह्म' (ते.उप.३:२:२:)]. All living beings are born out of food and are sustained by food and they have not only considered the food value in terms of nutrition but also tried to analyze the food value from the viewpoint of its source, season and geographical consideration, as

well as, individual's psychophysical constitution and taste. Thus the food is not only considered to be responsible for maintaining the physical health but also for our good or bad thoughts. That is the reason why, everywhere in Indian scripture *yuktāhāravāhāra* has been recommended. Yogis like Svātmārāma, Carāṇadāsa, Vasiṣṭha etc. have included *āhāra* (food) as one of the components of *Mahāvratā* - in line with *Ahiṃsā*, *Satya* etc. Thus it can be stated that according to Yoga the concept of *āhāra* is not limited to the physical aspect which we satisfy through eating and drinking but it also includes all types of intake in the form of thoughts that we receive as a result of interaction in the society. Therefore, the source and effect of food have been discussed in detail and '*Yuktāhāra*' or '*Mitāhāra*' (appropriate or measured diet) has been recommended.

**Yogic literature defines *Mitāhāra* as follows -**

- i) सुस्निग्धं मधुरहारश्चतुर्थांशं विवर्जितः। भुज्यते शिवसंप्रीत्यै मिताहारः स उच्यते॥ (H.P. I/58)
- ii) शुद्धं सुमधुरं स्निग्धमुदरार्थं विवर्जितम्। भुज्यते सुरसंप्रीत्या मिताहारमिमं विदुः॥ (Gh.S. V/21)
- i) Eating sweet, unctuous food offered first to the almighty (i.e. not eaten for one's own satisfaction) - leaving one quarter (of the stomach) empty - this is known as "*Mitāhāra*".
- ii) They call it *Mitāhāra* (balanced diet) which is pure, sweet, lubricated and fills only half the stomach and which is eaten to please the God (in oneself).

Above-mentioned definitions of *Mitāhāra* not only indicate the quality of food but also recommend a complete code with regard to food, which can be understood as follows.

#### **a. Quality of Food:**

Yogic texts such as Haṭhapradīpikā, Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā, Yogopaniṣad and Vasiṣṭha Saṃhitā have given ample information regarding **wholesome** and **un-wholesome** (H. P. I/59 and Gh. S. V/23-26) food items on the basis of the quality of the food stuff wherein along with many other food items -fresh butter, ghee, milk, sugar cane, banana, coconut, grapes, clove, cardamom, apple, *harḍa* - are said to be wholesome (Pl. refer Haṭhapradīpikā (H.P. I/62) and Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā (V/17-20). Even among the wholesome food, one should select the food - लघुपाकं प्रियं स्निग्धं तथा धातुप्रपोषणम्। मनोभिलाषितं योग्यं योगी भोजनमाचरेत् (Gh. S. V/29) i.e. easily digestible, agreeable, soft and sticky, which nourishes the elementary substances of the body and which is desirable and proper. Similarly Hathapradipika also recommends —

पुष्टं सुमधुरं स्निग्धं गव्यं धातुप्रपोषणम्।

मनोभिलाषितं योग्यं योगी भोजनमाचरेत्॥ (H. P. I/63) i.e. one should eat food i.e. nutritious, sweet and unctuous, products of cow's milk, nourishing, of own's choice and suitable to the temperament. Moreover, such food items are to avoided which are -कठिनं दुरितं पूतिमुष्णं पर्युषितं तथा।

अतिशीतं चाति चोष्णं भक्ष्यं योगी विवर्जयेत्॥ (Gh. S. V/30)



i.e. which are hard, polluted, putrid, producing heat inside the body, state, extremely cold or extremely hot.

Thus, from the list of wholesome and unwholesome food, it can be deduced that Hatha yogis accept the methods of classification of food items according to Ayurveda.

Wholesome	Un-Wholesome
1. From the view point of <i>Rasa</i> -Sweet has been recommended.	bitter, pungent, sour, salty have not been recommended
2. From the view point of <i>Effect</i> -cooling food stuffs have been recommended.	heat producing food stuffs have been considered unwholesome.
3. From the view point of <i>digestion</i> - light food considered wholesome.	heavy food stuffs have been considered unwholesome
4. Wholesome food items are either Subsiding <i>Pitta or Vāta or Kapha</i> .	Unwholesome food items are either aggravating <i>Vāta or Pitta or Kapha</i> .
5. Food items which are fresh, pure and agreeable only can be called wholesome.	Food which are heated over again, stale, impure and non-agreeable can be called unwholesome.

In the light of the above discussion, people who are suffering from obesity must keep in mind that Yoga literature has evaluated the quality of food on the basis of Ayurveda and not on Western Parameters - since no foodstuff can be said to be prohibited according to them.

#### b. Quantity of food:

In the definition of *Mitāhāra* the statements like - "leaving one fourth of the space" also refer an indication of quantity. Obesity and other disorders of modern times are mainly because of non-observance of the above rule. Therefore, it is necessary that we identify our need and eat accordingly then only we can be benefited from the food we consume.

#### c. Mental condition while eating:

The statements in the context of *Mitāhāra* like "शिवसंप्रीत्यै" (offered to Almighty) (H.P. I/58) तथा 'सुरसंप्रीत्या' (to please the God) (Gh.S.V/21) indicative of the mental attitude while eating. In order to understand this, if we take into consideration the theory of 'as in Macrocosm so in Microcosm', we will also understand that the creator of Macrocosm is also the creator of Microcosm. Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa himself has said in Gītā - 'अहं वैश्वानरो भूत्वा प्राणिनां देहमाश्रितः।' (B.G. XV/14) i.e. "I, abiding in the body of all living beings as *Vaiśvānara* associated with *Prāṇa* and *Apāna* - digest the four kinds of food". One should eat by surrendering oneself to That Ultimate otherwise "अहंकारविमूढात्मा कर्ताऽहमिति मन्यते" (B.G. III/27) one may develop the attitude of "I am the doer" which is the cause of all maladies. . One should cautiously avoid such attitude and this has been indicated by the statements like "offered to Almighty" or "to please the God". This attitude is gradually expanded and further transforms into "वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्"

Thus, we can summarize the above discussion on *Mitāhāra* as follows:

- Observance of long list of Wholesome and Unwholesome food.
- One fourth of the stomach to be kept free.
- Purity and Cleanliness
- Sweet and unctuous foodstuffs
- Easy digestible
- Mental attitude should be of "offering to Almighty"

If one follows the above-mentioned instructions with regards to the food, the person will remain physically fit and mentally aware and also he will be able to attain higher values in life.

Yogic Literature describes that every object of the visible world is the transformation of three-fold energy (*Guṇas* i.e. *sattva-rajās-tamas*). These *Guṇas* differ in their nature. "प्रीत्यप्रीतिविषादात्मकाः" (Sāṅkhya Kārikā 12-13) Sattva is the indicator of purity, creativity and bliss. *Rajās* is said to be the indicator of stimulation, impatience and pain. *Tamas* is indicated by ignorance, darkness and immobility. The quality of every object of the world has been determined on the basis of dominance of a particular *Guṇa*. Thus, on the basis of the dominance of *Guṇas*, the objects either are *Sāttvika*, *Rājāsika*, or *Tāmasika*. Similarly on the basis of three *Guṇas*, the food items, as well as, the consumers are also classified as *Sattvika*, *Rajasika* or *Tamasika* -

पुरुषं सत्त्वसंयुक्तमनुमीयाच्छमादिभिः

कामादिभिः रजो युक्तं क्रोधाद्यैः तमसा युतम्। (Śrīmadbhāgavatapurāṇa 11/25-9)

Those who have control over senses are called *Sāttvika*; those who are indulged in passion and enjoyment are *Rājāsika* whereas the persons having anger, greed, lust etc. should be identified as *Tāmasika*. In *Bhagavadgītā*, the three types of food have been described in following manner:

आयुः सत्त्वबलारोग्यं सुखप्रीतिविवर्धनाः।

रस्याः स्निग्धाः स्थिरा हृद्या आहारा सात्त्विकप्रियाः॥ (B.G. XVII/8)

i.e. the food that increase vitality, energy, vigor, health, joy and cheerfulness, which are savoury and oleaginous, Substantial and Agreeable are liked by the persons of *Sāttvika* quality.

कट्वम्लं लवणात्युष्णतीक्ष्णरूक्षं विदाहिनः।

आहाराराजसस्येष्टा दुःखःशोकभयप्रदाः॥ (B.G. XVII/9)

i.e. the food that is bitter, sour, saline, over hot, pungent, dry and burning are liked by the *Rājāsika* and are productive of pain, grief and disease.

यातयामं गतरसं पूति पर्युषितं च यत्।

उच्छिष्टमपि चामेध्यं भोजनं तामसप्रियम्॥ (B.G. XVII/10)

i.e. the food which are -stale, tasteless, stinking, cooked overnight, refused and impure- liked by Tāmasika ones.

It is evident that out of the three types of food quoted above, Sāttvika food has been recommended since Indian thought considers realization of self as the sole aim of life. Sāttvika food works as initial step in the process of actualizing this aim. To actualize this highest goal, the role of food (as conducive or non-conductive) has also been discussed e.g. *Atyāhāra* (overeating) has been considered as non-conductive whereas, *Mitāhāra* (measured diet) has been recommended as conducive. In order to emphasize on observance of *Mitāhāra* it has been said that he who begins the practice of Yoga, without controlling his food habits, suffers from many diseases and does not make any progress in Yoga.

### III. How do we digest the Food that we consume? Traditional understanding.

#### a. General understanding:

If we ask this question to western dietician he may say that our body works like a machine which needs fuel in the form of energy and air, water and food supply us that energy. Thus, consumed food and water transform itself into energy in order to maintain the temperature of the body to its optimum level so that mechanism inside the body could work properly.

#### b. Traditional understanding:

Yogic tradition (Śiva Samhitā V/73-74) has given thought on this issue a little differently-Food is considered to be of **four types**:-To be chewed, sucked, licked and drunk. When these four types of food are consumed - it is transformed into three kinds of '*Rasa*' (liquid):

- i. The first (essence) part of this *Rasa* works as nutrition to our subtle body i.e. mind, intellect, ego etc.
- ii. The second part, which is of middle type, nourishes the 'Seven Dhatus' of the body.
- iii. The third part, which actually is the waste material, is thrown out of the body through various passages - such as CO<sub>2</sub> is thrown out from the lungs, sweat from skin, urine and stool from their respective organs.

According to yogic tradition, the mechanism of this transformation of food into *Rasa* and its assimilation in the body is regulated by *Prāṇa* which has been named differently depending on its different functions. *Prāṇa* residing in the Heart region is responsible for every intake; so also whatever we eat through mouth travels through the *Annanalikā* (Esophagus) up to the navel region, which is the region of *Samāna* that digests/assimilates the food. Food after digestion is transformed into *Rasa*, which is supplied to the whole body with the help of *Vyāna* since *Vyāna* is said to move in the whole body. Excretion of waste material is the function of *Apāna*. *Udāna* residing in the throat to head region is supposed to regulate our thought, emotions or capability of learning and speaking. In this way we can understand how the food is digested and is responsible for our existence. The



existence includes not only the physical aspect but encompasses all aspects – mental, emotional, spiritual etc.. The body-mind complex functions properly only when we follow 'Yuktāhāravihāra' otherwise the same food may give rise to various disorders: 'रोगाद्याहार संभवा: ।'

#### IV. Management of obesity through Yogic Diet

Not only the obese people but every one of us must understand that every individual is unique and his food requirements are also unique depending on his/her physical constitution and mental temperament, as well as, time and space. Therefore, it is necessary that every individual should recognize his or her Mental and Physical requirements, which is possible only through introspection and experience. No one else can do it. Yogic tradition provides us some guidelines as follows:

##### a. When to eat?

i. The Yogic tradition recommends that "एकाहारं निराहारं यामान्ते च न कारयेत्" (Gh.S. V/31) one should not eat within three hours after one full meal. However, even this cannot be taken as hard and fast rule since it depends mainly on individual's energy expenditure and functioning of the digestive system e.g. old person may have less appetite in comparison to the young and a child will have more appetite in comparison to the young person. Therefore, a child may require food even before three hours gap. Thus, a person should understand and develop an insight of his energy requirements. Generally one should follow the rule of '**Eat when you are really hungry and drink when you are thirsty**' whenever a person violates this, he is subjected for adverse effects.

ii. One should not eat while viewing T.V. or during business discussions, usually we eat more or less than the required quantity of food. This happens because our attention is not towards food but it is diverted to T.V. programs or business deals. Therefore, one should eat with total attention so that we can enjoy the taste of the food. It is said- '*Śataṃ vihāya bhoktavyam*', which actually means leave your hundred types of jobs while eating.

iii. Yogis have given a good scientific base for deciding when to eat? Whenever the body requires energy or also during the expenditure of energy, we can experience the dominance of our right nostril e.g., when we are angry, the right nostril becomes dominant and contrary to this, when we are calm and quiet, the left nostril becomes dominant. This works an indicator as to the requirement of energy. Thus, when our body really requires energy, automatically our right nostril becomes dominant. Therefore, it is said that '**eat while right nostril is dominant**' "अनिलेऽकं प्रवेशे च भोक्तव्यम्" ('Śiva Saṃhitā' III/42).

##### b. How to eat?

One should take care of following factors while eating:

### I. Physical and Mental condition while eating:

Every one of us understands that when we are physically or mentally tired or restless, we become unable to determine the right quantity, quality of the food conducive for health. Thus, we should ensure the physical rest and mental ambiance before taking meal.

### II. Chewing of the food:

Chewing of the food should be proper. Nature has given us 32 teeth suggesting that every morsel should be chewed at least for 32 times. This method promotes better secretion of digestive juices starting from the saliva which is sufficiently secreted and mixed with the food serves as important agent responsible for digestion. This is also conducive for the function of different systems in the body. Similarly, whatever knowledge we receive from the external world, that should also be properly screened and then only should be accepted. While doing so our focus of attention should be on those factors which are conducive for our health in its totality.

### III. Avoid strenuous work soon after meal :

It is said that one should lie straight on one's back at least up to 8 breathing, sleep on the right side for 16 breathing and after that change the position to the left and continue the position for at least 32 breathing. We must know that *Prāṇic energy* is responsible for digesting the consumed food. If this energy is utilized immediately after meal for some strenuous work, it will have its consequences on our digestion. Therefore, resting a while immediately after meal is necessary.

### c. How much to eat?

The criterion for determining the quantity of food should be as per the need of an individual. It can not be determined by others since every individual's digestive capacity and need of energy depends upon his energy requirement and expenditure. Yogic tradition has recognized this fact and therefore, they have given some guidelines in this direction, which can help in determining the quantity of food for oneself. Vasiṣṭha, in his *Samhitā*, has recommended the number of mouthfuls depending upon the "Āśrama" one is undergoing. A person of *Brahmacarya āśrama* should eat double the quantity recommended for *Grahasṭha* (the householder) *āśrama* and person of *Grahasṭha āśrama* should consume double the quantity recommended for *Vānaprastha* or *Sannyāsi*. This statement has been made taking into consideration individual's energy requirement and expenditure.

In this context, Yogi Caraṇḍāsa has said "क्षुधा मिटे नहि आलस आवे" and thus indicates that one should consume to the extent that appetite is satisfied but it should not induce physical lethargy. In this way, he has emphasized on the point that quantity of food should not be less or more, rather it should be completely balanced according to one's need. Similar concept is available in *Bhagwadgītā* (B.G. VI/17) also. "नात्यश्नतस्तु योगोऽस्ति न चैकानश्नतः" i.e. neither overeating nor under eating is conducive for healthy life and therefore,



a balance in quantity should be maintained. That is why, Gītā has recommended 'Yuktāhārahāra'. Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā (V/21-22) and Haṭha Pradīpikā (I/58) have described the same under the concept of 'Mitāhāra' (measured diet) i.e. a person should divide his intake capacity in four parts and maximum half part should be filled by solid food, one fourth should be filled with water and rest one part should be left empty for free movement of vāyu.

अत्रेन पूरयेदधं तोयेन तु तृतीयकम्।

उदरस्य तुरीयांशं संरक्षेद्वायुचारणे॥ (Gh. S. V/21-22)

The need for unobstructed flow of vāyu has been discussed in detail in the context of digestion of food. This can be followed only if we develop an understanding of how and when to eat?

#### d. 'What' and 'what not' to eat?

Selection of appropriate food item is very difficult but equally important. It must be according to one's Physical constitution, mental temperament and purpose. . It is also worth noting that Yoga recommends *Sāttvika* type of food since Gītā (XVII/8) and other Yoga texts as mentioned above "शुद्धं सुमधुरं" (Sweet), "स्निग्धं" (unctuous) etc. however, the types of *āhāra* declared by Gītā as *Rājasika* and *Tāmasika* have been condemned or considered non-conducive because of their *Rājasika* or *Tāmasika* properties, Yogic texts have also considered them non-conducive in the context of *Mitāhāra*. (Pl. see the above discussion on *Mitāhāra*)

### V. Food and Thought:

During the discussion on the concept of Yogic diet it has already been stated that food nourishes not only the gross body but it is also responsible for our moral or immoral thought & behaviour. Food determines our mental attitude, which is further responsible for various human values. Therefore, in the literature, the purity of food has been very well appreciated.

आहारशुद्धौ सत्वशुद्धिं सत्वशुद्धौ ध्रुवा स्मृति।

स्मृतिलाभे सर्वग्रन्थीनां विप्रमोक्षः। (Chāndogyaopaniṣad 7-26-2)

i.e. on purity of food depends purity of internal organs, purity of internal organs leads to stability of memory and if memory is stable the person remains free from all sorts of mental conflicts. This concept has been amply supported in our Indian Literature.

'निकल्मषो भवेद् भक्तो राजन् शुद्धान्नभोजनात्।

प्रसीदन्तीन्द्रियाण्याशु सत्त्वं च परिवर्धते॥" (Bh. Va. Up. 4-15)

Such statements confirm that pure food makes Mindstuff pure leading to arousal of pure thoughts resulting into blissful condition of internal and external organs.

Although in the earlier paragraphs it has already been discussed in detail about various aspects of yogic diet, here some special points are given to highlight the concept of "Purity of food"

- a. What is the source of food - Pure or Impure?
- b. With what mental attitude it has been cooked?
- c. With what mental attitude it is consumed?
- d. Are we eating to live or living to eat?
- e. Whether food has been shared or consumed alone?

Thus it can be said that food is not only the physical substance but it has been understood by associating it with many aspects of human existence which goes to contribute towards the development of individual's personality as a whole.

## VI. Conclusion

We can conclude that not only the obese people but all of us should understand that -

- a. Yogic concept of Food (ĀHĀRA) has a broad connotation which not only nourishes the gross body but also the subtle body as the sensory inputs are also considered as food and therefore, food has been recommended on the basis of its source and effects.
- b. Food is at the base of our morality thus this concept has also been associated with values like *Ahiṃsā*, (non-injury) *satya* (a man of faith) etc. Therefore, *Yuktāhāra* -*vihāra* & *Mitāhāra* have been recommended.
- c. Food has also been classified on the basis of Tri-guṇas and has been identified as *Sāttvika*, *Rājasika* or *Tāmasika*. Out of these *Sāttvika* food has been recommended whereas *Rājasika* and *Tāmasika* have been prohibited.
- d. Obese person can take the lesson from the above discussion wherein when to eat?, how to eat?, quality, quantity, attitude of mind during meal have been given sufficient thought. *Mitāhāra* should be cultivated as regular habit.
- e. Food is not merely a physical substance. Rather, it has been accepted as one of the important contributors towards shaping our personality as a whole.

Thus Yogic Diet has tremendous potential to prevent and treat the problem of obesity and other health hazard( like heart, kidney, pancreas, joints etc.) but one has to walk through it.

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