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The Concept Of *Mitahara* For Healthy Living:

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Abstract: In this paper I have tried to focus on the concept of *Mitahara* or controlled diet for healthy living. Controlled diet plays an important role in keeping the body and mind healthy. Here I have tried to explain the term *Mitahara* from the point of view of *Hatha Yoga*. The *yogis* that practice *Hatha Yoga* implement the principle of mindful eating in moderation. The article explains what is *mitahara*, highlights the various benefits of *mitahara* and to bring **awareness** towards the food that we consume.

Keywords: *Mitahara*, *Ahara*, *Mita*, *Sattvic*, *Anna*, *Shodhana* and *Abhyasa*.

Introduction:

We are going to know about the concept of '*mitahara*' or **controlled diet** for healthy living. '*Mita*' means moderate or controlled, and '*Ahara*' means food or diet. The concept emphasizes consuming food that is balanced, eaten in right quantity and at right time keeping in mind the effects of food on both body and mind. *Mita* is also means '*Sattvic*' (pure), the diet which is fresh, light and nourishing.

Ancient scriptures like *Bhagavad Gita* mention that *sattvic anna* (food) is very important for the **physical** and as well as **mental** health. Through controlled diet, the impurities of the body and mind are removed, and one achieves a healthy body and mind. Hence, '*ahara*' acts as an important vehicle or **tool** to live a healthy and happy life. Therefore, it is rightly said 'you are what you eat'.

Importance of *Mitahara* in *Hatha Yoga*:

The definition of '*mitahara*' (verse 1.58, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*):

Mitahara is means fresh, pleasant, agreeable and controlled diet. Controlled or balanced diet means that the stomach should be **half** filled with food, one quarter with water and leaving one quarter empty. The food should be eaten with gratitude as an **offering** to the God. A *yogi* or *sadhaka* is advised to follow a **controlled** and **balanced** diet because such a diet aids in **spiritual growth** and holistic living. A balanced diet restores balance at physical as well as mental and emotional level.

Hatha Yoga Pradipika is one of the ancient texts on *hatha yoga*. It is written by *swami Swatmarama*, a disciple of *swami Gorakhnath*. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* contains instructions on practice of *asanas* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing exercises) and techniques of *kriyas* (for purification).

The word *hatha* means 'forceful', hence *Hatha-Yoga* is 'yoga of force', the approach of which is through rigorous physical postures (*asanas*) and breath control techniques (*pranayama*). They help the *yogi* to cultivate higher spiritual realizations by means of a divine body. The systematic and rigorous disciplines of *Hatha-Yoga* help the *yogi* to realise the 'Ultimate Reality' thorough the vehicle of physical body.¹ The *asanas* and *pranayamas* along with other practices like concentration and meditation, help to purify the body and mind by removing all the toxins or impurities from the body as well as mind. Traditions like *Hatha Yoga*

believe in “**detoxification**” of the body-mind, for having clarity of vision. The most common *Sanskrit* term for “**purification**” is *shodhana*.²

The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, attributed to *Yogi Svatiarama*, delves into the philosophy of diet (*ahara*) and physical exercises (*asanas*).

Let’s explore the key aspects related to *mitahara* in the ancient text:

- The food should be consumed with the attitude that it nourishes the body and mind and hence is **sacred**.

Hata Yoga Pradipika mentions,

ब्रह्मचारी मिताहारी योगी योगपरायणः । अब्दादूर्ध्वं भवेत्सिद्धो नात्र कार्या विचारणा॥१.५७॥

This verse emphasizes the importance of mindful and balanced eating as a part of the **yogic** or spiritual **lifestyle**. It encourages moderation and awareness in dietary habits. A spiritual person who eats a moderate diet (*mitahara*) along with other devotional practices can successfully achieve his target in half a year.

1. p. 41, The Deeper Dimension of Yoga.
2. p. 146, *ibid*.
3. p. 1, *Gerand Samhita*.

Gheranda Samhita written by sage *Gheranda*, is one of the three main texts on *Hatha Yoga*, along with the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and the *Siva Samhita*. Here the *yoga* is based on *abhyasa* (practice) which is called *saptanga yoga*, seven limbs of *yoga*.³ By following these practices, beginning with *asanas* (postures) and ending with *samadhi* (freedom), the *sadhaka* is able to achieve **wisdom** or enlightenment.

The fifth dimension of *saptanga yoga* is **pranayama** (breath control). Here the importance of **balanced diet** is mentioned in the verses 5.16 to 22.⁴

“He who practices yoga without **moderation** of **diet**, incurs various diseases, obtains no success.” (verse 5.16)

A *yogi* who does the practices without consuming a **moderate diet**, does not progress in the spiritual journey because he falls prey to **illness** and **diseases**. A *yogi* should make a habit of eating a diet which is pleasing, pure, cooling, oily or lubricating foods, till the stomach is **half filled**. Such a diet is called *mitahara* which is balanced or moderate.

Sage Gheranda says that a *sadhaka* should eat less and should consume a balanced diet.⁵ Eating until the stomach is full is prohibited. Thus, physical health is maintained by consuming food which causes no discomfort or stomach problem.

Further it says, a *yogi* should not eat hard (undigested), sinful or putrid food, very hot or stale food, as well as very cooling or very much exciting food. Prohibited to eat only once a day and fasting, can remain without food for not more than 3 hours. (Verses 5.30-31)

- A *yogi* regards food as a **medicine** which purifies the body and mind for the maintainance of the body and to process spiritually.⁶

Gheranda Samhita says, the purification is acquired by the regular practices (*abhyasa*) of *Asanas* (postures) that gives **dhridhata** (strength) to the body and *Pranayama*, breathing techniques which gives **laghima** or lightness to the body. These along with other practices, leads the *yogi* to *Samadhi* or freedom. (verses 5.10-11)

4. p. 393, *Gheranda Samhita*.
5. p. 395, *ibid*.
6. p. 58, *Hatha Yoga Prdipika*.

The root cause of ill health is **impurities** in the body that create **disorders**. Impurity does not simply imply waste matter, but also includes physical, mental, emotional and spiritual impurity. Physical impurity is mainly related to **diet**, its qualities and effects. For example, the mealtimes should be right for the food to get digested properly. According to ancient *Vedic* tradition, food should be consumed after **sunrise** and before **sunset** to remain free from diseases. Secondly, stomach should not be overloaded keeping half the stomach empty to give space for water and air to digest the food. And lastly, meals should be taken in intervals twice or thrice a day, not more than that. A controlled diet consumed at right time, in right quantity and at intervals, keeps one free from all the diseases and disorders. (verses 5.35-36)

Food should be eaten for the **nourishment** and **maintenance** of the body and not for enjoyment or pleasure. Eating a controlled diet mindfully in small quantity makes it **medicinal** since it purifies the body and as well as mind.

- *Mitahara* means '**sattvic** food', light food which is easy to digest. ⁷

The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* emphasises on eating a moderate or **sattvic** diet—those that are pure, light, and nourishing.

The seventeenth chapter in *Bhagavad Gita*, mentions that there are three mental temperaments, *Sattvika*, *Rajasika* and *Tamasika*. And the type of food that we eat is responsible for it, for example if one consumes 'pure' food or **sattvic ahara**, the body and mind becomes pure, free from all negativities, ego and fear. (verses 17.8,9,10)

The following verse from *Bhagavad Gita* describes the benefits of **sattvic ahara**:

आयुःसत्त्वबलारोग्यसुखप्रीतिविवर्धनाः । रस्या स्थिरा हृद्या आहाराः सात्त्विकप्रियाः ॥17.8॥

Sattvik anna increase life, purity, strength, health, joy, and cheerfulness, which are fresh and nutritious. The **wise** person savours such *mitahara* (pure food) because **sattva** is **goodness**.

The cultivation of **wisdom** is clearly a priority on the spiritual path. Wisdom is the function of the presence of **sattva**. By eating pure and wholesome food, keeping the body healthy through appropriate exercise and other habits, gives rise to pure and wholesome thoughts, cultivating self-observation, self-understanding, and self-discipline.

⁷ P. 58, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.

The more we cultivate the **sattva** quality in ourselves, the purity in the mind increases and the wisdom gained will guide us in making the **right choices** in all areas of life. Whereas, the disturbed mind, which is lacking wisdom, tends to engage in unproductive work. Therefore, cultivating **sattvic** temperament in body and mind helps us to grow and prosper in life.

Conclusion:

Awareness about food or food wisdom can create **harmony** and **happiness** in life. *Acharya Vinoba Bhave* in "Talks on the *Gita*", says **purity** of **food** and harmonious living are very much related. ⁸ If food is pure, mind becomes pure. Hence there is contentment and happiness, both at individual level and society at large because one can contribute for the betterment of the society. By applying the philosophy of the *Gita* related to food, harmony and orderliness in the society can be achieved.

It is stated in the *Gita*, that when the **sattva** principle is reinforced by consuming **sattvic** food, the nature of man's **charitable** disposition is enhanced and gets motivated to act through ethical means. Also, when man strives not only for self but others, is able to alleviate from suffering and pain. ⁹

In today's modern world, medicines/drugs are available for almost any illness or diseases, from minor illness like cold or cough to serious diseases like cancer. Medicines are a boon to mankind which has brought many positive changes in the life of people. Due to medicines, people are able to live long and healthy life till they die. However, in ancient times when medical science and medical treatments were not that advanced, people used to depend on food or herbs to cure the diseases. All philosophical scriptures contain the wisdom regarding the important the **sattvic** diet to stay healthy and happy.

Even in modern times with advanced medical facilities, patients are advised to eat healthy diet. Medicines at times can be used in emergency situations and can only be used to relieve the patient from pain or distress temporarily. But food plays an important role to eradicate the illness from its root cause and cure the patient from the illness permanently.

8. p. 269, Talks on the Gita.
9. p. 782, Bhagwat Geeta, Sant Dnyaneshwar.

Controlled and healthy diet is the answer for non-medical therapeutic method for healing or curing any disease. Healthy food increases our immunity due to important nutrients present in food which gives us energy to grow, to be active and healthy. Our body gets nourishment if the food that we eat is nutritious and in right quantity. If unhealthy and inadequate, then it often leads to illness or diseases.

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