

Enough Is Enough

Yoga inspires us to eat healthy foods, but too much of even a good thing is bad for body and spirit. Here's why it's worthwhile to practice aparigraha (greedlessness) at the table.

By Victoria Moran

“Don’t worry about changing your eating—yoga will change your eating.” This is what my first yoga teacher told me back when I was so young and flexible that even the extra 30 pounds I was carrying didn’t impede my asana practice. The comment was prophetic—up to a point. As my practice progressed, I started eating whole-grain bread instead of white, and brown rice instead of Rice Krispies. I became a vegetarian. But in terms of sheer quantity, I ate as much as I ever did: snacks, seconds, the leftovers I couldn’t bear to “waste,” and so on.



As a committed yogi, I’d already begun to explore how the yamas (restraints) and niyamas (observances)—the ethical underpinnings of yoga, pertaining to issues such as nonviolence, sexual responsibility, and honesty—could help me transform my life. But skillfully applying the yama aparigraha, or “greedlessness,” was beyond me. I understood the concept in theory—the importance of unselfishness, not hoarding, not taking more than we need or can use. But I had a hard time exercising aparigraha when it came to menus, picnics, and potluck suppers. I didn’t like to think of it at the time, but those 30 pounds were made up of calories I hadn’t needed and was, in effect, hoarding.

What’s for Dinner?

It’s difficult to be a yogi when your focus of concentration is on what’s for dinner or the discomfort in your stomach from having had too much for lunch. These are familiar states for a great many people, however, especially in the United States—where more than half of us are storing enough fat to be considered overweight and a thirsty customer can serve himself a quart-size soft drink at any convenience store. The “small” order of McDonald’s fries, the only size offered in 1970, looks stingy compared with today’s medium and large servings. Fast food isn’t the only culprit, though: When presented for the American restaurant customer, even healthy cuisines come in feast-size portions. Smart restaurateurs know that to be successful, they need to feed our greed. How did we get this way?

“Greed comes from a poverty mentality,” says Cyndi Lee, founder of OM yoga in New York and author of *Yoga Body, Buddha Mind* (Riverhead, 2004). “A poverty mentality is feeling like you don’t have enough, so you try to get more. If you go out to dinner and somebody wants to taste your food when they haven’t even tasted their own yet, that’s a poverty mentality. It causes a person to want more—more food, clothes, compliments, attention, anything.” Curiously, affluence can breed this poverty mentality as efficiently as lack can, especially in a media-dominated society saturated with the message that acquisition and consumption are the keys to power and pleasure.

Mixed Messages

When it comes to food, the temptation to be greedy comes packaged in our culture as a curious pair of opposites: a dessert may be “delicious,” “decadent,” and “to die for,” but having it show on your body is taboo. This sets up a yearning to both indulge and deny ourselves. Excessive yearning flies in the face of aparigraha. And this kind of want is a double-edged threat to the serenity we get from all of our yoga, meditation, and pranayama.



“If you’re confused because of the messages you’re getting, your ability to make skillful choices is undermined,” says Scott Blossom, a Northern California yoga instructor, doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, and longtime student of Ayurveda. “In Ayurveda,” he continues, “digestion is considered the center of health. Our ability to digest physical, mental, and spiritual food is the difference between becoming ill and debilitated, and being healthy and strong.”

In purely physical terms, overeating is the archenemy of proper digestion. One commentary on the Bhagavad Gita states that even nectar becomes poison when it’s eaten too much. Scott Gerson, M.D., director of the National Institute of Ayurvedic Medicine and author of *The Ayurvedic Approach to Weight Loss* (Lotus, 2002), explains that “eating too much of even the best foods will create ama, the product of incompletely digested food that forms—initially—in the intestines, but that can migrate to other tissues. It is a metabolic toxin that can greatly disturb the structure and function of any tissue or organ.

“If we overindulge in any kind of food,” he says, “we create toxins from the grossest to the most subtle levels of our existence. A famous sloka [verse] from the Charaka Samhita [an Ayurvedic text] states, ‘One should not select food articles based on habit or ignorance. After examination, use only wholesome foods, as one’s formation precisely reflects the food consumed.’” In other words, we are what we eat.

Saying Whoa

Having said all that, how much is enough? According to Gerson, “Ayurveda observes that after any given meal, the stomach should contain approximately 50 percent solid food—the amount that would fit comfortably into your outstretched, cupped hands—25 percent liquids, and 25 percent air—a necessary ingredient for any process of combustion, which is essentially what digestion is.” To know when you’ve reached these amounts, you have to develop an awareness of digestion and learn to read the body’s signals of satiety.

This attention is crucial, especially for people who find that in attempting to cut back, they’re more likely to cut loose. “It’s a process of being sensitive to the experience of eating and its aftereffects,” Blossom says. “We want the body to feel satiated and the mind to feel content. The yama aparigraha is the other side of the niyama santosha [contentment]. The two are connected. What makes the body happy is to get all the elements that support its tissues. The mind is satisfied by the colors on the plate, the artistic presentation of the meal, and, at a deeper level of consciousness, food prepared with lots of love.”

With awareness, we start to see what is appropriate from one meal to the next, one day to another, an early stage of life to a later one. “The answer to ‘What’s enough?’ is a moving target,” Cyndi Lee says. “It’s about watching your mind, seeing if you’re being indulgent. You get to decide in each moment instead of building a judgment system that creates rationalization and resistance: ‘I can’t ever have dessert because people are starving and I’m short and it’ll go straight to my butt.’ Then it’s a rule and it’s dead, no longer connected to your own wisdom.”

Making Friends with Food

Many of us, however, lack consciousness regarding what we’re eating and how much, or—as certified Anusara Yoga teacher Amy Ippoliti saw in herself some years ago—we’re hyperaware about food and its effect on our bodies. Growing up in New York, where to a teenager it can seem as if image is everything, Ippoliti struggled with eating disorders. She reached a turning point when she was both heavily involved in yoga and training to teach Model Mugging, an empowerment-based self-defense program for women. “I came to this radical sense of self-acceptance and worthiness,” she remembers. “It took a lot of soul-searching and work, but once I was able to recognize the splendor inside—the purpose of yoga, really—I could more clearly see it in my body too. I



started eating in a more aligned way. Coming from a place of self-honor, self-recognition, it becomes less about aparigraha and more about the body telling you what it needs.”

When moderation—without self-denial—is the norm, the body and mind join forces to help maintain this pleasant state. “It’s not to say you can’t overeat every now and then,” Ippoliti says. “Have the extra helping or the ice cream if you want, but have it with great joy: ice cream with ecstasy! Then, if you’re connected to yourself, you’ll find yourself craving healthy foods or less food. You’ll come back into alignment, because that’s where you’re most comfortable.”

Ippoliti is 12 years past her troubles with overeating, undereating, and obsessing about either one. I’m now 20 years past my initial struggle to balance eating well with eating right. It is true: Yoga can change your eating. You just have to care enough about yourself to let it.

A Side of Mindfulness

When you bring the light of awareness to your eating, you’ll develop an inner sense of what truly nourishes you. If this kind of focus doesn’t come naturally to you, you can start with just one or two elements of mindfulness at a time. The following suggestions can help you cultivate a body that is well fed by an intentional mind.

Take a moment of silence, or actually say grace, before eating.

Sit down for meals and slow down to savor them.

Choose foods of such high quality—fresh, organically grown, thoughtfully prepared—that nutrition is optimal and satisfaction comes easily.

Experience with full consciousness the pleasure of eating, the comfort of having plenty but not too much, and the energizing lightness that comes when the stomach isn’t full.

Let go of fear—fear of eating too much or weighing too much, fear of being an imperfect yogi or an imperfect person.

Seek help—if eating too much is a long-standing and baffling problem—from a nutritionist, therapist, or support group as an adjunct to the ultimate authority, the wisdom that resides within.

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