

Dropping Off (3)

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The spiritual journey continues. Next stop aahaar.

I was born and brought up as a vegetarian. Even after living in the USA and abroad for over 20 years, I never compromised on this. It was not always easy, but obviously not impossible since I survived hale and hearty! And I always thought it was enough to be a vegetarian to be healthy. Was I wrong! (See 'Journey of a Vegetarian' in issue of Life Positive). As a vegetarian and living a fast paced life, I was eating all kinds of packaged, frozen, processed and chemically treated foods. My meals were at all kinds of odd, irregular hours. Many times these meals were in the company of hardcore carnivores, sharing from the same table and kitchen. It did not seem to matter so long as I was eating something vegetarian.

But it did seem to matter. This realization was one of the earliest and perhaps the farthest reaching of all my realizations as I embarked on my spiritual journey. I discovered what Krishna meant by tamsik / rajasik / saatvik that he repeatedly espoused to Arjun in the Gita's eighteenth chapter. These gunas apply to all aspects of life, but for me they became particularly relevant in the context of aahaar. Aahaar is not just food. The closest English word would be nutrition, and when I talk about saatvik aahaar in this piece as part of the spiritual journey, there is no English equivalent, just as there is no equivalent for karma, dharma, yoga, dhyana and many other Sanskrit words.

As one moves further along on the spiritual plane and reaches higher levels of consciousness, many hardened practices and habits drop off naturally. The chakras open up, energy starts moving more vigorously, and the body, mind, spirit synchronicity starts to take firm shape. In order for this to continue its momentum and take us to still higher

levels, the body needs aahaar, and this aahaar has to be as saatvik as the rest of our being has started to become. Saatvik aahaar is food made with TLC and awareness, from the freshest, purest ingredients, without the use of any animal products. It has to be equally accepted and consumed with full awareness in each morsel, recognizing and relishing the taste of each ingredient that has gone in the preparation. Saatvik aahaar is ideally eaten with hands, so that one can enjoy the food using all our five senses, including the not so obvious one of hearing. Yes, hearing the sound of food. As a Zen koan says, 'when you are chopping vegetables, chop vegetables'. Next time you are cutting and chopping and cooking, or near someone who is doing that, and when you are actually eating, bring your hearing sense to its full awareness. You will be surprised with the various sounds of peeling, cutting, sizzling, boiling, simmering, and finally chewing and biting. They form as much part of our sensory perceptions around food as aroma, taste, touch and sight.

At first, all packaged foods dropped off. Next, all fast foods dropped off. Then, all refrigerated foods became absolutely minimal; no leftovers. I have not used the microwave in years. Non-stick cookware and all plastic got banished from my kitchen. I learnt the importance of organic foods not just for how it benefitted our own body but, perhaps more important, how it was critical for Mother Earth herself. Mother Earth that provides all our nourishment has been ravished and ravaged for years by all the chemicals, pesticides and pollutants that have infiltrated the food chain through the soil and water and air. She needed to be nurtured back to health. Organic food became an increasing part of my diet, both at home and while eating out. This was more difficult to achieve in India than abroad. Sadly, over the years I have found it easier to eat healthy outside India than in India. There is a far greater awareness of wholesome food in many other countries than India. This sounds counter intuitive but true.

As I got deeper in the world of energy healing, it became clear that our human body was but a microcosm of the entire Universe. There was no reason for human being to have made his own rules contrary to the Laws of Nature. With spiritual awakening comes an acute sense of observation, and with this sense I noticed that the entire animal world,

all the birds, all the plants were up and awake well before the crack of dawn. And with twilight they had already found their abodes for the night. Have you ever seen an animal or bird eating after sunset? If you water a plant in the night, it is a sure recipe for it to wither away in a few days. The sun and the moon rise and set at their pre-determined times. The entire solar system and in fact all the galaxies and the entire Universe work with such clockwork precision that it has become very easy for science to predict their behavior. But the 'intelligent' human being has created such havoc for himself due to his unnatural behavior, that it is quite easy to know where to pin the blame. We eat at odd hours, well into the night. We eat the wrong things at wrong times. We do not pay heed to the simple rule of 'local, seasonal, organic'.

My meals became regular and regulated. I studied up on naturopathy and understood the medicinal benefit of almost every ingredient (herb, fruit, vegetable, grain) that goes into my meal. I found a book by Vandana Shiva, 'Bhoole Bisre Anaj', and discovered the pleasures of ragi, nachini, jowar, bajra and many other forgotten grains that were oozing with energy and nutrition. Wheat and rice became rare in my diet. All of the gluten based diet related bloatedness and heaviness disappeared. I was a heavy consumer of milk and related products. I suffered from respiratory congestion and related problems for a long time, until I met a naturopath doctor in Boston. He suggested I try giving up milk for a few months and see what happens. Sure enough, after three months I was again breathing free, and I have not looked at milk again. I became a deep follower of naturopathy. Regular detoxification became an essential part of my lifestyle. This was primarily in the form of fasting supplemented by an annual colonic. Indians are generally deeply rooted in the act of fasting. But this has come about only as an adjunct to religion itself. Fasting as a tool of cleansing and detoxification would never have become so popular if it had not been cloaked with various mythological anecdotes, stories, superstitions and rituals (mahashivratri, ekadashi, sawaan, karwa chauth and many more). In my workshops when I talk about the importance of fasting as a healing practice, people are generally reluctant to adopt it. Yet, they will have no hesitation if it was suggested to them that they should fast once a month to appease a certain deity to alleviate some problem they may be facing in life. I am

always happy that the purpose is served, however the message is delivered and accepted. However in naturopathy, there are strict rules around proper fasting, and unfortunately these are not followed when fasting is undertaken without full awareness, e.g. many people 'prepare' for their fast by stuffing themselves to the hilt the night before, and 'break' their fast by doing the same. This does not provide for any detoxification or cleansing. I have adopted a very simple fasting routine. Once a month I only drink water for 24 hours; once a month I only consume liquids for 24 hours; and once a month I only eat fruits all day. The meals are equally light the day before and the day after the fast, allowing for the digestive system to fully benefit from the rest it got.

The rule of naturopathy that 'medicine is the food of the sick and food is the medicine of the healthy' became my mantra. If ever I was down with some ailment or had one of those low energy days, I did not run to the medicine closet or the doctor any more. Instead I pulled out my naturopathy and homeopathy books and found the right remedy. Like many people in India, I became an amateur homeopath! I even started prescribing remedies as part of my healing treatments and in my workshops. This can come about only from a deep sense of conviction from what one believes in, and gradually it is no longer just a belief, but has become my nature, my swabhav, a fresh conditioning as Ramesh Balsekar would say.

As with almost everything that dropped off along the spiritual path, there was a silver lining to everything. Since I had not renounced the world as most conventional people would believe, and since I was still very much rooted in the day to day life in the real world, I was still connected to friends, family and acquaintances. Once they heard about my strange eating habits (most importantly, no heavy meal after sunset), invitations became rarer. What more could I ask for! It freed up my evenings for more satsangs and workshops that were typically preceded by a very light meal or a potluck. No energy was wasted in trying to drum up metabolism, without the help of the sun, to try and digest all that heavy food eaten well after sunset, and then waking up all bloated and tired. Instead, I and my group used all the energy cultivated all day long from all the saatvik aahaar we had imbibed. The

difference was not subtle, it was dynamic! Saatvik aahaar was truly the fuel necessary for me to continue on this enlightening journey. I was blessed!

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