

AYURVEDIC DIETARY PRINCIPALS FOR PUJA

Ayurveda recommends foods that are sattvic (pure / balancing) in quality, avoiding those foods that are excessively rajasic (stimulating) or tamasic (dulling). It is very important when offering foods in pujaas and yajnam to follow the recommendations of the shastras so that the foods beings offered will be pure and sattvic. Because sattvic foods are healthful and pure in nature, they act as a good conduit to channel the energies of the devas. Foods that are tamasic or rajasic would have to be purified before they could be blessed (because they hurt people by nature). What follows are some basic guidelines for foods that are suitable for offering at vedic pujas and yajnam, and some recommendations for their preparation.

These are instructions for cooking foods for Puja or Yajnam (offering foods to God). They can also be applied to Bhiksha (offering foods to sadhus and Swamijis) or Anna Danam (feeding people during Pujas). These recommendations are laid out by the Dharma shatras, Ayurveda shastras, Aagamas, and Grhya shastras. They are given for the purpose of helping empower pujas and so they may maximize the benefits from their spiritual service. Perfections is not expected, but steady progress toward perfection through sincere effort is demanded. Devotees who are keeping serious spiritual practices for the realization of God will also find these suggestions useful to apply toward their own dietary habits.

The shastras say that when food is offered to Brahmins, it is as good as offering food to the Lord Himself (even better perhaps than offering foods in puja). The shastras describe a Brahmin as a person who is occupied in the worship of / service to the Lord. People have gotten the wrong idea that if someone's parent is a Brahmin, that that person is a Brahmin regardless of his behavior. This is not what the Rishis had in mind when they described the varna (caste) system. For the purposes of the practice of Anna Danam, it can be considered that the person who has chosen to attend Puja or Yajnam is Brahmin. If he goes then to work to serve under other people in a hospital or software company, at that time, he of the shudra caste. When a person is occupied in the worship and service of the Lord, he is Brahmin. It is said to be very pleasing to the Lord when Brahmins are fed. It is considered an important part of every puja, vrata (religious vow), and utsava (festival). Because a Sannyasin has given up the worldly things in order to serve the Lord, it is always generates extremely great punyam (merit) to offer food to Sannyasis. It is the duty and great blessing for the householders to feed Sannyasins.

Ayurveda recommends a diet that consists of the shad rasa (six tastes) along with a variety of colors, textures, aromas, and shapes in every meal. When cooking for puja, bhiksha, or anna danam it is important to create meals that include all six tastes. For puja and yajnam Swamiji makes an offering of six different dishes of food (one featuring each taste) to ensure that this balance is achieved. These tastes and some examples suitable for pujas follow:

1) Sweta or Madhura (Sweet) - Milk, Rice, Whole Grains, Gur, Honey, Fruits, Nuts, starchy vegetables, and Ghee are examples of the sweet taste. People require much more of the sweet taste than any other taste (3 to 9 times more than the other tastes). It is best to rely on the natural sweetness of grains or starchy vegetables for the sweet taste. An excess of Sweets like cake,

kheer, or laddu and an excess of sweeteners should be avoided. Refined Sugars and artificial sweeteners should be avoided favoring raw sugar, gur (jaggary), or honey instead. IT should be noted that honey should not be cooked, but can be added to dishes after they are cooked. Honey should not be used in equal quantity to ghee by weight. It is said to be best to eat sweet fresh fruits about 30 minutes before a meal, but not in combination with other foods.)

Sweet taste is cooling (honey is heating) and nourishing. It gives strength, balances the emotions, and gives santosha (contentment). It promotes peace, love and tranquility. In excess it increases fat, and causes lethargy, obesity, mental dullness, and depression. Excess sweet taste hurts the spleen and pancreas. Excess sweet taste (particularly refined sugars and grains) can cause diabetes.

2) Lavanga (Salty) - Salt (Though table salt or sea salt is alright in moderation; Ayurveda recommends Saindhav or Kala Namak. The salty taste is required for life and health, so Ayurveda recommends a little in every meal. For people with high blood pressure salt should be reduced. Vegetables containing natural salts like celery, beets, carrots, dandelion, kale, mustard greens, spinach, chard, and turnips may provide enough sodium for those who must reduce their salt intake. There are five types of salt (pancha lavang) used in Ayurvedic medicines. These are available at Indian stores and Saindava is recommended as best in general. An excess of salt should be avoided.)

Salty taste is heating. It has softening and calming effects. In moderation it promotes absorption and elimination. In excess it can cause vomiting, burning pains, and dryness. Excess salt hurts the heart, blood pressure, kidneys, and can lead to feelings of greed.

3) Amla (Sour) - Lemons, Limes, Raw Mango, Tamarind, Yogurt (Strong sour things like alcohol and vinager should be strictly avoided. It should be noted that yogurt should not be cooked or eaten with fruits.) The sour taste is heating

Sour taste is heating (limes are cooling). It relieves thirst and increases digestion. Sour taste has stimulant, and nourishing qualities. It gives strength to the tissues of the body (but tends to weaken the reproductive tissues). An excess of sour taste can hurt the liver and cause anger and envy.

4) Katu or Tiikshna (Pungent) - Ginger, Mild spices like Jeera / Cumin, Black pepper, Mustard oil or seeds (Excessively spicy food should be avoided. Achar / Pickles, Chili peppers, fresh or dried or powdered should be strictly. It is good to make chutneys with these milder ingredients like fresh ginger.)

Pungent taste is very hot. It reduces toxins and promotes sweating. It is very stimulating and causes heat n the body. An excess of pungent taste creates mental agitation and excess heat. It can hurt the lungs and heart. An excess of the pungent taste causes anger, hatred, depression and mental instability. It should be used in small amounts.

5) Tikta (Bitter) - Bitter Melon, Neem, Methi, Fresh Greens like Collards or Mustard

greens (Though coffee is bitter it should be avoided due to its stimulant quality).

Bitter taste is very cold. It is cleansing and detoxifying. It cleanses the liver and the bloods. It reduces all body tissue and creates lightness in the mind. Excess bitter taste can lead to death (most natural poisons are very bitter). It hurts the heart and causes feelings of grief. This taste is needed in very small quantities.

6) Kashaya (Astringent) – Legumes, Dals, Haritaki / Harde fruit, spinach and Okra (Tea is astringent but

should be avoided for its stimulant quality. Warm milk diluted with water and spiced and sweetened with honey could be offered instead of tea. Also it is possible to make a beverage like chai with tulsi instead of tea. Tulsi tea bags can be ordered online from Organic India or through natural foods stores like "Whole Foods.")

Astringent taste is very cold. It stops bodily discharges like bleeding. It can stop sweating and diarrhea. It can be healing to the skin and mucus membranes. Excess astringent taste causes death. It causes depletions and ungroundedness. Excess astringent taste damages the colon, deranges vata dosha and causes fear and other powerful negative emotions. Of the six tastes the least of this taste is required.

FOODS TO BE STRICTLY AVOIDED FOR PUJAS:

It is said that in Vedic times only three spices were permitted for use in yajnam: black pepper, cardamom, and urid dal. These regulations are very lenient by comparison.

Meat, Fish, Eggs, Alcohol, Drugs, Chemical additives and preservatives, Coffee, Tea, Refined Sugars, Artificial Sweeteners or colorings, Garlic, Raw Onion, Excess Chili Pepper, Micro-waved foods, Frozen, Canned or preserved foods,

IT IS BEST TO FAVOR

Natural, Fresh, Organic, foods whenever possible. Good sattvic foods are fresh, organic, raw dairy, fruits, nuts, whole grains (white rice is acceptable), fresh veggies like squash, okra, green beans etc. It is better to use fresh local produce, milk, and honey etc whenever possible. Fresh Indian varieties of Veggies are also acceptable but not frozen. Dried dals and grains are acceptable. It is good to make foods tasty and to season them well with mild spices like curry leaves, cumin, coriander, turmeric, saffron, cardamom, cinnamon, fennel, dill, methi, mustard, urid, fresh ginger, bay leaf, and basil or tulsi etc. For heavy dishes like dal, it is good to add some pungent spice like hing, mustard, black pepper, or sour ingredients to help digestion. Warm spices are also helpful to digest dairy and sweets like cardamom, nutmeg, etc. Fresh cilantro, coconut, and cucumber are very cooling; they are helpful to balance foods that are hot and spicy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COOKING

After bathing, wearing clean clothes; foods should be cooked as a spiritual practice for offering to the Deity. The Mantras of the Deity should be recited while cooking. Foods should not be tasted or smelled before they are offered. Foods should be cooked ideally

no sooner than 3 hours before offering and should be tightly covered with an opaque cover so that none but the cook and priest shall see the food before it is offered. It is better to offer foods cool than to reheat them. It is best to use only a little ghee for cooking (unless using mustard oil for its pungent quality). Other oils may be introduced by using seeds, nuts, or coconut. Fried foods should be avoided. Milk or cream should not be used with salty foods nor should it be boiled for a long time. Thickening milk can be done with arrow root or corn starch for kheer etc. Again Yogurt and honey should not be cooked. Too much heavy foods like dairy, chana, kidney beans etc should be limited. Excess of tomato and other plants in the nightshade family should be limited: these are tomato, potato, eggplant, bell pepper, chili peppers. It is ideal when possible to cook in vessels reserved for this purpose. This keeps the household energies from impurifying the offerings and the ritual from unduly purifying the families. (Do the best that is possible and pray to the lord to make up for faults).

For Yajnam performed by Swamiji he requires:

1) Laddus made from besan and ghee and gur (Other ingredients cook be added or substituted for the besan but refined sugars should be strictly avoided).

2) Pongal made from milk, ghee, rice, urid dal, coconut, cashew, raisons, and gur. After taken from the heat rose water and honey should be added.

3) Panchamrita

1 part ghee

2 part honey

2 part gur

2 part yogurt

and 8 part milk should be blended well by hand (saffron, ganga jal, fresh tulsi leaves, and rose water can be added)

He requires 6 dishes made each to feature one of the six tastes listed above.

These could be whatever the cook likes. An example menu follows

1 Sweet - Plain rice or Chapati with ghee

2 Salty - This could be any salty dish like a vegetable subji or salty papads etc.

3 Sour - this could be tamarind flavored rasam or a yogurt dish (this could be lemon rice

or curd rice or tamarind rice).

4 Pungent - this could be a chutney made substituting ginger and black pepper for the chilis.

5 Bitter - this could be a "saag" made with fresh collard greens.

6 Astringent - this could be a dal.

For feeding large groups it is possible to make other dishes. Ideally these will be cooked in the home by spiritually minded people who strive to use the proper ingredients. All food offered to the devotees should be pure and sattvic as much as possible. Store bought and commercially prepared foods are not usually suitable: though some restaurant owners etc may willingly contribute if they are inspired by the desire to serve the Lord.

For rituals two or three meals should be offered per day to all who attend. A simple dish like pongal or upama is suitable for breakfast. If two meals are served, one should be

served at mid day. This is the time to eat the biggest meal. Meals should be served after sunrise and before sunset. It may be appropriate to serve milk or beverage and a snack in the afternoon or evening; especially when serving only two meals.

Plain water is the best beverage (without ice and not too cold or hot)

It is possible to serve diluted, heated, spiced milk, or tulsi tea, or fresh unsweetened fruit juice as an alternative.

TRIDOSHA

Foods that are too strong in quality may increase one of the three doshas (vata, pitta, kapha). If there is no excess in the foods served, and a good variety is offered, these natural foods will be tri doshic (they will balance the three doshas). Balance should be kept in mind when planning a menu.

To help with the digestion of these foods an offering is made for each of the doshas.

King is offered for vata; Saunph / Fennel and chandan for pitta; and Tambulam / Betel for Kapha. Also the triphala (Amalaki, Bhibetaki and Haritaki) are offered to help absorption and elimination. These Dipana and Panchana and Virechana herbs will be prepared by Swamiji along with a special blend of Rasayana herbs made to fulfill the soma offering of vedic Yajnas.

It is good to remember that the most important thing as the devotees strive toward these ideals is the spirit of bhakti (Love and Devotion). Foods cooked with bhakti will always be pure. These other suggestions simply help to empower our efforts. Please strive to do the best you can. May the grace of the Lord support your efforts. OM