

Yuktāhāra: A Yogic Blessing to Mankind

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Abstract: The entire world is suffering from a restless attitude due to becoming part of a worthless competition. As part of this meaningless competition, people from all sects, religions, cultures, classes, ages, sectors, and occupations try to achieve something beyond their necessity and capacity. This unethical and unhealthy competition increases the fear of losing slowly. In the end, it becomes the root of behavioral disorders, physical disorders, and mental disorders. It is a matter of joy that those physically and mentally exhausted people are taking shelter in the abode of yogic science. Through the practice of different *āsanas*, *mudrās*, *bandhas*, *kriyās*, *prāṇāyāma*, meditation etcetera under the able guidance of experts, they make themselves physically fit by preventing and curing ailments. The concept of *yuktāhāra* is one among them. It is always true that the physical body cannot be sustained and nourished without food. But Yoga makes this food nectar by prescribing perfect quality, measured quantity, and proper schedule for food. *Yuktāhāra* does not promote fasting or overeating. It recommends those foods which are nutritious, easily digestible, proper, pure, and agreeable. The practice of this truly measured diet brings physical strength and mental stability which are necessary to make a practitioner fit for the further journey in the path of Yoga. Nowadays, yogic practices seem to be the best practices for the welfare of mankind.

Keywords: Yoga, *Yuktāhāra*, *Mitāhāra*, *Mitabhajana*, Balanced diet, Food, Nutrition, Physical and mental well-being.

Introduction:

It is the age of competition for competition. People from all around the globe, from all sects, religions, cultures, classes, ages, sectors, and occupations have become part of this rat-race. This global trend leads everyone to achieve something beyond their necessity and capacity. As a result of this needless competition, by hook or by crook, an idiot desires honor; a poor wants luxury. No one is satisfied with his condition. A sound of dissatisfaction can be heard from every corner of today's society. No one is ready to understand and practice the concept of *saṃtoṣa* (contentment) that brings the highest happiness.¹ Rather the ignorant people, having no interest in *saṃtoṣa*, are increasing their dissatisfaction at every moment being the competitor of this unnecessary competition. Sometimes they even take part in a race without any reason. Everyone is competing with everyone. At the worst level of this attitude, one starts to compete with himself. Noteworthy is, practitioners of this attitude become tired in and out. Still more, it silently kills one's self-confidence by gradually increasing the fear of losing. Thus, a person becomes totally exhausted and easily comes under the clutch of behavioral disorders, physical disorders, and mental disorders. Now, being less confident and helpless, people are compelled to forget their own skills and depend on others. In this situation, they are also compelled to accept the superiority of artificial intelligence instead of natural intelligence.

However, it is a matter of joy and pride that some of these exhausted people are trying to find out a true solution to get rid of diseases, stress, lethargy, restlessness, anxiety, fear, anger, insomnia, and so on. After exploring various thoughts and techniques, they finally take refuge in the abode of Yoga. Yoga prescribes a practical solution to every problem. The science of Yoga makes a human being physically healthy, mentally calm, and spiritually enlightened. That is why, the popularity of Yoga is clearly roaring in all corners of the world. Yoga seems to be the best transformation tool that mankind ever has had.

It is beyond doubt that Yoga is a *Mokṣaśāstra* (the science of salvation). The final goal of this science is to attain *kaivalya*, the ultimate freedom from all kinds of afflictions. Ideally, this science is not merely for maintaining good health. It primarily teaches some techniques like *āsanas*, *kriyās*, *mudrās* etcetera to bring physical wellness because good health is necessary to make a practitioner fit for the further journey in the path of Yoga. In a nutshell, through yogic practices, one can overcome body-mind conflict and can get final rest in his own state.²

Nevertheless, we cannot omit the therapeutic importance of Yoga. Most of the time, a physically and mentally down person enters into the domain of Yoga to get a long-term solution. Yoga takes care of them with a holistic approach. Through the practice of different *āsanas*, *mudrās*, *bandhas*, *kriyās*, *prāṇāyāma*, meditation etcetera under the able guidance of experts, they make themselves physically fit by preventing and curing ailments. Through different yogic therapies, people get mental relaxation and healing. Thus, by abiding by the yogic prescription, a person experiences psychological and physiological stability and regains cheerful enthusiasm. In fact, this therapeutic aspect of Yoga is one of the most important reasons why Yoga is becoming the most reliant abode of a disturbed person.

Every single yogic habit has some positive impact on our body or mind. For instance, *āsanas* are an important tool to get relief from different types of body pain. Meditation leads us to a higher level of concentration and makes us calm internally. Interestingly, an appropriate diet is essential for both a true practitioner of Yoga and a seasonal practitioner of Yoga. In fact, a good food habit is beneficial for all. A moderate diet is always good for keeping health sound. In Yoga, the concept of restraint in food is termed as *yuktāhāra* or *mitāhāra*.

Yuktāhāra: The concept in brief

Food is a basic need to survive. Keeping this fact in mind, every branch of Indian knowledge systems emphasizes the importance of food from different points of view. For example, we can point out the famous *pañcakośa* theory (the five-sheath theory) that is based on *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. These five sheaths are the five layers of human individuality or personality. These sheaths explore the mechanism of body, mind, and spirit. Among these five, the first sheath is called *annamayakośa* (the food sheath) and is identified with the gross body. It specifies that the physical body cannot be sustained and nourished without food. What kind of food should be taken? *Viduranīti* gives a short and sweet answer to this question. According to Vidura, a person who wants his physical well-being, must take that kind of food which is edible, easily digestible, and beneficial for the health.³ *Cāṇakyanīti* (4/8) states that inedible food consumption (*kubhojanam*) burns our bodies. The habit of taking food before proper digestion is poisonous to health.⁴ It is also believed that the availability of edible food and the good digestion power to digest that food both are blessings of great austerity.⁵ So, various aspects of food

have been explained in the different streams of Indian knowledge systems. But, the *Yogaśāstra*, having a practical and scientific approach, takes this idea to a new height.

Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, one of the most authoritative texts of Yoga, considers every aspect of human life as Yoga. This unique treatise of Yoga defines Yoga from different viewpoints. In this article, the term *yuktāhāra* is taken from one of those popular definitions of Yoga. In its sixth chapter, Lord Śrīkṛṣṇa beautifully says—

*yuktāhāravihārasya yuktaceṣṭasya karmasu/
yuktasvapnāvavodhasya yogo bhavati duḥkhahā//*

(*Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, 6/17)

According to the etymology, Yoga means union (*yujir yoge*), concentration (*yuja samādhau*), and control (*yuja saṁyamane*). In this definition, the Lord establishes the real nature of control. Yoga is an all-round balance in life. A person, who is restrained in food, recreation, action, sleeping, and waking, attains a perfect balance that leads him towards a world which is free from all sorrows. So, a perfect balance in every aspect of life brings separation from afflictions which is the real goal of Yoga. Interestingly, *yuktāhāra* is placed first in this list. It indicates that a moderate diet is a primary requirement to bring a proper balance in life. The actual significance of the term *yuktāhāra* is also categorically explained in *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*. Neither too much eating nor not eating at all is praiseworthy in Yoga.⁶ Rather, Yoga prescribes a middle path between these two which is *yuktāhāra*. It is not only a concept but also an art for maintaining a true balance in the consumption of foods.

This concept of *yuktāhāra*, measured diet, is termed as *mitāhāra* in different texts of *Hāṭhayoga* and *Yogopaniṣads*. *Hāṭhapradīpikā* (1/38) mentions *mitāhāra* as the foremost among the *yamas*. *Mitāhāra* has also been enlisted as one of the ten *yamas* by *Triśikhibrāhmaṇopaniṣad* (Mantra part, 33), *Varāhopaniṣad* (5/13), *Śāṇḍilyopaniṣad* (1/1), *Jābāladarśanopaniṣad* (1/6). *Gheraṇḍasaṁhitā* (5/2) includes *mitāhāra* in the list of four prerequisites for *prāṇāyāma*. *Yogakuṇḍalyupaniṣad* (1/1-2) describes *mitāhāra* as one of the three methods for controlling *vāyu* (*prāṇa*). Again, *Darśanopaniṣad* (1/19) uses a new term *mitabhojana* in place of *mitāhāra*. Actually, *yuktāhāra*, *mitāhāra*, and *mitabhojana* are just only the synonyms of the same concept.

The concept of *yuktāhāra/mitāhāra/mitabhojana* as described in different texts of Yoga could be systematically summarized on the basis of these three significant points- a. Quality of food b. Quantity of food c. Time of taking food.

Quality of food

All yogic texts emphasize on the quality of food. Considering food as a primary need of human beings, yogic science is further concerned about maintaining a good quality of food. It is that seed from which the idea of nutritious food springs in the modern era. However, yogic scriptures establish this concept very clearly through categorizing the foods according to their quality and providing a long list of recommended and prohibited foods.

Śrīmadbhagavadgītā introduces three categories of food on the basis of their nature. These three types of foods are— 1) *Sāttvikāhāra* 2) *Rājasāhāra* 3) *Tāmasāhāra*. The nature of these three types of foods is being described in the below mentioned table—

<i>Sāttvikāhāra</i> (Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, 17/8)	<i>Rājasāhāra</i> (Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, 17/9)	<i>Tāmasāhāra</i> (Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, 17/10)
<i>Sāttvika</i> food is those kinds of foods that enhance life-span, enthusiasm, strength, health, contentment, and pleasure. These foods are juicy or sweet, bland, substantial or nourishing, and loving in nature.	The foods which cause sorrow, mourning, and disease are called <i>Rājasāhāra</i> . These foods are extremely bitter, sour, salty, very hot, pungent, dry, and burning in nature.	Those foods are <i>Tāmasa</i> which are cooked long ago or get very cold, dry, smelled bad, stale, left-over, and impure.

Obviously, *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* recommends *Sāttvikāhāra* which are delicious to eat, and good for maintaining physical strength and mental cheerfulness.

Different texts of *Haṭhayoga* prescribe an elaborate list of recommended foods and prohibited foods to maintain a true *mitāhāra*. Here is a brief list of those foods—

Recommended Foods	Prohibited Foods
Foods which are pure, bland, sweet, and nutritious; wheat, rice, things free from husk, barley, green gram, black gram, horse gram, milk, ghee, cow milk products, sugar, butter, sugar-candy, jaggery, honey, dry ginger, betel, camphor, ripe plantain, cocoanut, pomegranate, grapes, lavalī, dhatri, cardamon, nutmeg, cloves, rose apple, myrobalan, dates etcetera. (<i>Haṭhapradīpikā</i> 1/58, 1/62-63; <i>Śivasamhitā</i> 3/39; <i>Gheraṇḍasamhitā</i> 5/17, 5/21, 5/27-28,)	Foods which are bitter, sour, pungent, salty, very hot, very cold, dry, heated over again, burning, impure, hard, stale; (huge amount of) green vegetables, sour gruel, oil, mustard, sesame, alcohol, fish, meat, asafoetida, garlic etcetera. (<i>Haṭhapradīpikā</i> 1/59-60; <i>Śivasamhitā</i> 3/35; <i>Gheraṇḍasamhitā</i> 5/30)

So, yogic science promotes true diet quality by prescribing the best grains, drinks, fruits, vegetables, and spices. Foods with good quality bring stability by all means.

Quantity of food

Just like the quality of food, the quantity of food is also an important aspect of *yuktāhāra*. Both fasting and overeating are prohibited in Yoga. *Yuktāhāra* encourages us to take appropriate amounts of food. Various scriptures of Yoga instruct on this in their own way.

According to *Haṭhapradīpikā* (1/58), a person should leave one quarter of his stomach empty to maintain a measured diet.

Gheraṇḍasamhitā's suggestion is half of the stomach should be filled with food, one quarter should be filled with water, and the fourth quarter should be left empty for movement of the air.⁷

Vasiṣṭhasaṃhitā (Yoga Kāṇḍa) measures the diet differently. 8 *grāśas* (mouthfuls) of food are recommended for ascetics. The forest-dwellers are suggested to take 16 mouthfuls of food. 32 mouthfuls are suggested for householders. Brahmācārins (students) could take food according to their needs. The rest are requested to consume a little less than their capacity.⁸

According to *Darśanopaniṣad* (1/19), abstaining from a fourth of the served food is the proper measurement for diet.

Yogakuṇḍalyupaniṣad (1/3) says leaving one-fourth of the stomach empty is measured diet. The same instruction can also be found in *Śāṇḍilyopaniṣad* (1/1).

Indeed, the yogic scriptures, though their words of expression are different, highlight a common point that the stomach must not be filled up to its highest capacity. We need to leave at least one-fourth of the stomach unfilled so that proper digestion can happen.

In this context, it is essential to recall the caution issued by Swami Vivekananda—

“One bit of food more or less will disturb the whole system...”⁹

Time of taking food

After taking proper care of the quality and quantity of food, one will have a few queries, e.g., how frequently should one take food? What is the ideal gap between two meals? How many times should one consume food in a day? Yoga justifies these queries by providing a meaningful schedule for taking food.

Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā enforces some dos and don'ts in this regard. Eating once a day, not eating at all, and eating again within three hours are strictly prohibited. It is rather encourageable to have at least two meals in a day, once at noon and once in the evening (though it is prescribed for the beginners of *prāṇāyāma* but it might also be beneficial for special cases of weight management).¹⁰

Śivasamhitā recommends to take food several times in a small quantity.¹¹ This text also gives a very technical instruction. It says a practitioner of Yoga should always consume food when the air flows into *Sūryanāḍī* (the right nostril).¹²

So, those who want to be measured in diet should consume food several times in a small quantity and could keep a gap of three hours. Eating again before proper digestion should be avoided.

A few common benefits of *yuktāhāra*:

After observing the list of recommended and prohibited foods, it can be said that a yogic diet is a perfect source of essential vitamins and minerals and makes a real example of a nutritious food habit.

Yuktāhāra ensures sufficient fiber-enriched foods which is helpful to prevent constipation. It is also effective in managing body weight.

Milk products make us energetic and strong.

The habit of consuming a small amount of food in several times helps to get rid of gastric problems.

The suggestion of leaving at least one-fourth of the stomach empty improves our digestion power slowly.

Conclusion:

Yogic science is very much aware and passionate about the proper diet. The ideas of fasting¹³ and overeating¹⁴ are mismatched with the concept of Yoga. Fast-ing causes malnutrition and overeating causes obesity. In fact, both are the plane of *vyādhi* (disease) which is one among the nine obstacles in the path of Yoga

(*antarāyās*) according to Patañjali.¹⁵ That is why, Yoga prescribes *yuktāhāra* which is beneficial for all people. *Yuktāhāra* encourages to maintain a proper quality, quantity, and schedule regarding the selection and consumption of foods. *Yuktāhāra* means consumption of those kinds of foods which are *puṣṭam*¹⁶ (nutritious), *laghupākaṃ*¹⁷ (easily digestible), *yogyam*¹⁸ (proper), *śuddha*¹⁹ (pure), and *priyam*²⁰ (agreeable). It is probably the simplest teaching on healthy food habits and balanced diet. The people having faith in *yuktāhāra* can get rid of a large number of health hazards. Sound health brings a peaceful state of mind. Thus, *yuktāhāra* makes a person physiologically strong and psychologically stable. It is always true that Yoga is not for keeping health good. But physical well-being is a by-product of Yoga. It is observed and clinically proven that people can overcome many health issues through different yogic practices. *Yuktāhāra* is one among those yogic practices. That is why, Yoga becomes the need of the hour.

Endnotes

1. *saṃtoṣādanuttamaḥ sukhālābhah*. (Yogasūtra, 2/42)
2. *tadā draṣṭuḥsvarūpe 'vasthānam*. (Yogasūtra, 1/3)
3. *yacchakyaṃ grasitum grasyam grastam pariṇmecca yat/ hitam ca pariṇāme yattadādyam bhūtimicchatā*// (Viduranīti, 2/14)
4. Cf., *Cāṇakyanīti*, 4/15.
5. Cf., *Cāṇakyanīti*, 2/2.
6. Cf., *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, 6/16.
7. *annena pūrayedardham toyena tu tṛtīyakam/ udarasya turīyāṃśam samrakṣedvāyucārṇe*// (Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā, 5/22)
8. Cf., *Vasiṣṭhasaṃhitā* (Yoga Kāṇḍa), 1/50.
9. Swami Vivekananda. *Raja Yoga*, p. 103.
10. Cf., *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā*, 5/31-32.
11. Cf., *Śivasaṃhitā*, 3/44 & 3/51.
12. *Ibid.*, 3/42.
13. Cf., *Śivasaṃhitā*, 3/36. & *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā*, 5/31.
14. Cf., *Śivasaṃhitā*, 3/37.
15. Cf., *Yogasūtra*, 1/30.
16. Cf., *Haṭhapradīpikā*, 1/63.
17. Cf., *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā*, 5/29.
18. Cf., *Haṭhapradīpikā*, 1/63 & *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā*, 5/29.
19. Cf., *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā*, 5/21.
20. *Ibid.*, 5/29.

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