

# Food Philosophy: Diet, Tradition, and Health in the Light of Indian Philosophical Thought

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## Introduction:

What do we mean by food philosophy? If we understand what philosophy is, then we can understand food philosophy. The word "philosophy" may be understood as foresight associated with knowledge. This knowledge is not limited to one dimension; rather, it includes the past, present, and future. Philosophy examines how knowledge from the past connects with the present and helps us understand or predict the future. When we analyze past experiences, observe present conditions, and conclude what may happen in the future, that reflective process is called philosophy. In that sense, food philosophy means understanding the past, present, and future of food. It includes knowledge of how people traditionally ate in ancient times, what kinds of food they consumed, what amounts were suitable for the body, and how well the body could absorb them. It also examines what we are eating now, how much our bodies can absorb, and how beneficial or harmful it is. By combining these two—past and present—we can determine what kind of food we should consume in the future.

## Primitive Food Habits and the Beginning of Human Consumption:

When different living beings were created on Earth, humans were also among them. In the beginning, humans were not as civilized as they are today. In the primitive era, food consumption was driven purely by hunger and survival. People did not think about what was beneficial or harmful for the body. The only concern was survival. Early humans likely ate fruits, vegetables, and the meat of wild animals they hunted. There was a constant struggle for survival. Gradually, as civilization developed, people began to understand how food could support physical health and bodily structure. They learned which foods were available and which could be cultivated for nutrition. In ancient civilized societies, people consumed grains, vegetables, fruits, and oils. As civilization advanced, cooking methods improved. Spices were discovered and used properly. Food preparation became more refined. Vegetables were cooked in oil and spices, and dietary practices improved alongside social development.

## Modern Food Habits and Health Problems:

In the present era, food habits have changed drastically. There is very little connection between modern food habits and traditional dietary practices. In many households, due to a lack of time and busy lifestyles, people rely on packaged and canned foods. These foods contain preservatives and chemicals. They are prepared quickly and require minimal cooking. The question arises: Which foods are good for our bodies? Good food is that which keeps the body healthy and does not create problems. In earlier times, ancestors lived up to ninety or even one hundred years, often dying natural deaths. Today, even before the age of thirty, people suffer from cholesterol, diabetes, high blood

pressure, thyroid issues, and hormonal imbalance. Lifestyle diseases are increasing. Is this only due to stress or modern life? No. A major reason is food habits. From morning to night, many people consume packaged food. Morning tea and biscuits are common. Both are packet foods, preserved for long durations. Such foods are not fresh and not organic. They are, in a sense, lifeless foods preserved with chemicals. For example, a banana remains fresh for three to four days. After that, it rots. That indicates it had life. But a biscuit can remain for months. The more we consume such preserved foods, the more our vitality decreases in our bodies. If we return to the dietary habits of our ancestors—rice, pulses, vegetables, and fish—many health problems may be reduced. Fish provides omega-3 fatty acids and minerals. Rice gives carbohydrates and energy. Pulses provide protein. Vegetables supply essential nutrients. A traditional balanced diet can maintain health.

### **Food Philosophy and Indian Epistemological Theories:**

Food philosophy can also be examined through philosophical systems such as Ayurveda and Nyaya. 1. Direct Perception (Pratyaksha): According to Nyaya philosophy, direct knowledge arises from the contact between sense organs and objects. When we eat fresh fruit and feel energetic, we directly experience its benefits. When we eat excessively oily outside food and suffer from acidity or discomfort, we directly experience its harm. Thus, through direct perception, we understand which food suits us. 2. Inference (Anumana): Inference is another important means of knowledge. If we observe that eating fresh home-cooked food keeps the body light and healthy over several days, we infer that fresh food is beneficial. If eating outside junk food repeatedly causes discomfort, we infer that such food is harmful. Thus, through repeated observation, we conclude that good dietary habits lead to good health. While not all diseases arise from food, a large percentage are connected to dietary habits. 3. Analogy (Upamana): Through analogy, we understand similarities and differences. Just as we identify rice by its white grains based on prior instruction, we compare food habits across cultures and recognize similarities. India is diverse, yet many regions share similar staple foods. Analogy helps us study food traditions comparatively. Shabda (verbal testimony): According to the Naiyayikas, Shabda (verbal testimony) constitutes a distinct means of valid knowledge (pramana). The knowledge acquired through words or sentences is termed "shabda-jnana" (verbal knowledge). Not all verbal knowledge is veridical; for this reason, the Naiyayikas identify Shabda as the specific source of infallible knowledge derived from verbal testimony. This knowledge originates from Apta-vakya—the utterances of trustworthy individuals. A person who possesses true knowledge (Satyaj) imparts authoritative testimony only when they speak truthfully with the specific intent of guiding others. However, the mere utterance of a true statement by someone does not automatically enable another person to acquire valid knowledge. True knowledge can be derived from the words of a Satyaj only when the actual meaning of their statement is correctly grasped; thus, Shabda-jnana arises from the realization of the true purport of the words spoken by a trustworthy person.

Based on the nature of its subject matter, Shabda is classified into two types: Drishtartha (about visible or empirical objects) and Adrishtartha (about invisible or non-empirical objects). Knowledge derived from the statements of a trustworthy person regarding a Drishtartha—a subject that is directly observable or empirically verifiable—is termed Drishtartha-jnana. Conversely, knowledge derived from statements concerning Adrishtartha—such as the knowledge gained from a meteorologist's forecast regarding rain—is termed Adrishtartha Shabda-jnana. Knowledge acquired from scientists' atomic theories, or from the pronouncements of sages regarding sin and virtue, falls under this latter category. Similarly, knowledge obtained from the testimony of witnesses in a court of law, or from the statements of a botanist regarding plants, are examples of Drishtartha-jnana.

Shabda is further categorized from a different perspective—specifically, based on the source of the utterance upon which the knowledge rests. Knowledge derived from the statements of ordinary, trustworthy individuals is termed Laukika Shabda-jnana (secular verbal knowledge), whereas knowledge derived from the Vedas is termed Vaidika Shabda-jnana (Vedic verbal knowledge). Laukika knowledge is not invariably infallible, as the statements of ordinary people are occasionally erroneous, for it is inherent in human nature to err. Nevertheless, Laukika Shabda-jnana derived from the statements of trustworthy and wise individuals remains both truthful and reliable. In the case of Vaidika Shabda-jnana, we encounter the very words of God, for the Vedas are, in essence, the creation of God. Since God is omniscient and perfect, Vaidika Shabda-jnana, grounded in His divine utterances, is deemed infallible and absolutely trustworthy. The Naiyayikas, however, maintain that both forms of knowledge—that derived from the words of God and that derived from the statements of trustworthy ordinary individuals—possess equal epistemological validity. "Shabda Pramana" refers to knowledge acquired through the words of trustworthy individuals—such as teachers, sages, or authoritative texts. Ayurvedic treatises—such as the Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita—provide detailed explanations regarding the nature, qualities, and Doshas associated with various foods, as well as their effects on the human body. Since these texts are considered authoritative, we can determine which foods are healthful and which are harmful based on the descriptions contained within them. For instance, in Ayurveda, food is categorized into three types: Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic. These concepts have reached us primarily through the medium of Shabda Pramana. Furthermore, the advice provided by physicians or nutritionists also falls under the purview of Shabda Pramana. Drawing upon their knowledge and experience, they guide us on what foods to consume, as well as when and how to consume them. We adhere to these instructions because we recognize them as credible sources of knowledge.

### **Metaphysical Perspective: The Three Gunas in Food:**

From a metaphysical perspective, especially in Samkhya philosophy, the three gunas—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—are applied to food. Sattvic Food: Sattvic food is light, fresh, and pure. It includes fresh fruits, vegetables, milk, curd, ghee, pulses (especially moong dal), and dry fruits such as almonds, raisins, pistachios, and dates. These foods are not chemically preserved or packaged. They are fresh and recently prepared. Such food makes the body light and the mind calm. Proper digestion reduces disease. However, even sattvic food can become tamasic if stale or rotten. Rajasic Food: Rajasic food includes fish, meat, eggs, and heavier pulses. These foods provide strength and energy. Rajasic food is necessary in moderation. One may maintain approximately eighty percent sattvic and twenty percent rajasic foods. Tamasic Food: Tamasic food includes stale, rotten, heavy, and junk food. Packaged and preserved foods fall into this category. Food stored in the refrigerator for several days and reheated also becomes tamasic. Such food increases heaviness, acidity, indigestion, and lethargy. Tamasic food affects both body and mind negatively and should be minimized as much as possible.

### **The Role of Ghee and Oils:**

Ayurveda emphasizes the importance of ghee. Traditionally prepared cow ghee, especially through the Bilona method, is considered highly beneficial. The body requires fats for proper functioning—the brain, heart, and joints need healthy fats. A balanced intake of oil and ghee is necessary. Refined vegetable oils and trans fats, often found in packaged foods, increase inflammation. Inflammation leads to various diseases. Pure traditional oils and ghee are considered beneficial. Inflammation increases when unhealthy fats dominate the diet. Reducing packaged food and refined oils may help reduce such inflammation.

### **A Holistic Way of Life for Health and Balance through Ayurveda and Ancient Indian Philosophy:**

Ayurveda and ancient Indian philosophy are actually interrelated. Ayurveda is not a treatment of sickness; it is the way of life. Ayurveda is translated as the "Science of Life." It is regarding the knowledge of how to live healthily. Ayurveda has a particular perspective regarding the body. It does not merely look at the body; it also looks at the mind and the spirit. Ayurveda is a concept developed out of Samkhya. According to this philosophy, there exist two things: Purusha, which is comparable to our consciousness, and Prakriti, which is comparable to the physical world. Our consciousness is related to Purusha, and our body is a part of the world. In order to be truly healthy, we must strike a balance between these two things.

Ayurveda has five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space. These aspects constitute our body and the world. When such elements are not balanced, then we may become sick. The manner in which these components interact forms three forces within our body: Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. Vata allows us to move, and it regulates our nerves. Pitta enables food to be digested and regulates our metabolism. Kapha is useful in making our body strong and healthy. By maintaining these forces in equilibrium, we must be healthy. According to Ayurveda, being healthy does not mean not being sick. It is about being in balance. It is what is meant by the fact that our body, mind, and spirit must be operating together. We must possess digestion, a sound body, and a peaceful mind. Ayurveda is associated with yoga and Vedanta. Yoga enables us to manage the body and mind. Vedanta makes us know the truth regarding our soul. In Ayurveda, being healthy, therefore, means building our body, mind, and spirit.

It is also important to follow principles in our day-to-day life. This is called Dinacharya. We are supposed to get up early, eat, do activities, and sleep well. Ayurveda attaches great importance to food. It acts as a medicine for our body. Food is of three kinds, namely, Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic. Sattvic food, such as fruits and vegetables are helpful in maintaining good health of the body and mind. Food can excite us, and this is known as rajasic food. Tamasic food can make us lazy. In order to be healthy, we ought to consume Sattvic food. Live a disciplined life. Indian ancient philosophy educates us on life, and Ayurveda teaches us how to live. It is in the integration of these two things that we are able to find balance. Be truly healthy. This is the secret of a happy life. Ayurveda teaches us that we need to know how to live in harmony with our body, mind, and spirit. We can be healthy by adhering to the Ayurveda values. Ayurveda and ancient Indian philosophy are related in a manner that enables us to come to terms with how to live a life.

### **Viruddha Ahara / Incompatible Food:**

In *Ayurvedic Science of Food and Nutrition*, Syal Kumar (2014) examines the concept of diet in Ayurveda and its implications for the modern world, highlighting its enduring significance.

Every particle in the universe is composed of five fundamental elements (panchabhuta), wherein one specific element tends to predominate. Consequently, every substance (Dravya) is influenced by one or another of these elements. This same principle applies to food or dietary substances. A specific combination of the five fundamental elements within food substances ensures their proper physiological functioning within the body. When certain foods—which are not meant to be consumed together—are ingested simultaneously, they become detrimental to the body due to adverse interactions occurring at the molecular level. This leads to indigestion (Ajirna) and subsequently results in the generation of 'Ama' (metabolic toxins). The term 'Viruddha' refers to anything that aggravates the Doshas (bioenergetic principles) but fails to eliminate them from the body. Foods and food combinations that disrupt the metabolic processes of the body's dhatus (tissues), hinder the formation of new tissues, and possess qualities contrary to the inherent nature of those tissues are collectively termed 'Viruddha Ahara' (incompatible food).

Acharya Charaka has classified incompatible foods based on various causes and sources, as explained below:

**Desha Viruddha (Regional Incompatibility):** Food produced in one geographical region may not be suitable for people residing in a different region. For instance, consuming dry and pungent foods in an arid region, or consuming unctuous and cooling foods in a marshy or wetland region. **Kala Viruddha (Seasonal/Temporal Incompatibility):** Consuming food that is contrary to the prevailing season or weather conditions. For example, consuming unsuitable foods during the summer or winter seasons. **Agni Viruddha (Digestive Fire Incompatibility):**

Food that is incompatible with one's Jatharagni (digestive fire/capacity). For instance, consuming heavy-to-digest foods when one's digestive power is weak, or consuming excessively light foods when one's digestive power is strong. **Matra Viruddha (Quantitative Incompatibility):** Consuming food in incorrect proportions, which then acts like a poison. For example, consuming equal quantities of honey and ghee. **Satmya Viruddha (Habitual Incompatibility):** Consuming food that is contrary to one's established dietary habits or constitution. For instance, a person accustomed to spicy and hot foods suddenly consumes cold and sweet foods. **Dosha Viruddha:** Food that is contrary to the body's Doshas (Vata, Pitta, Kapha). **Sanskar Viruddha:** Incorrect methods of food preparation. For instance, baking instead of cooking (boiling/simmering). **Veerya Viruddha:** A combination of foods possessing opposing potencies (energies). For instance, consuming foods of cold and hot natures together. **Koshta Viruddha:** Food contrary to one's intestinal constitution. For instance, laxative-type foods for a person prone to diarrhea. **Avastha Viruddha:** Food contrary to one's current physical state. For instance, consuming Vata-aggravating foods after physical exercise. **Krama Viruddha:** Consuming food at the wrong time or in the wrong sequence. For instance, eating without feeling hungry or delaying a meal after hunger has set in. **Parihara Viruddha:** Foods that are prohibited based on a specific ailment or condition. For instance, consuming cold foods immediately after eating ghee (clarified butter). **Upachara Viruddha:**

Inappropriate food choices during the course of medical treatment. For instance, consuming heavy foods while undergoing Panchakarma therapy. **Paaka Viruddha:** Incorrect cooking techniques. For instance, undercooked, overcooked, or burnt food. **Samyoga Viruddha:** Incorrect food combinations. For instance, consuming sour foods together with milk. **Hridaya Viruddha:** Food that is unpalatable or distasteful to one's palate. **Sampada Viruddha:** Food of inferior quality. For instance, unripe or spoiled food. **Vidhi Viruddha:** Violation of the prescribed rules for consuming food. For instance, eating in an unclean environment or in a crowded public place.

**Examples of Some Common Incompatible Foods:** 1. The meat of wetland animals is incompatible with black gram (urad dal), honey, milk, sprouted grains, and jaggery. One should not consume raw meat or meat containing bile. The meat of a crane, when consumed with alcohol or fried in pork fat, is extremely harmful. It is inadvisable to cook the meat of the black francolin, peacock, chameleon, or quail in castor oil. 2. Consuming fish and milk together generates toxic substances. Sour foods are incompatible with milk. One should not consume milk immediately after eating leafy vegetables. The consumption of meat and milk together should be avoided. 3. Ghee (clarified butter) that has been stored in a bronze vessel for more than 10 days should not be consumed. 4. Kheer (rice pudding) or other sweet desserts should not be consumed alongside alcohol, rice, or green gram (moong dal). 5. A mixture containing equal proportions of any two or three of the following substances—honey, ghee, animal fat, vegetable oil, and water—is harmful. 6. One should not consume a cornstarch solution immediately after consuming an alcoholic beverage. Mustard oil is incompatible with turmeric.

### Guidelines Regarding Dietary and Lifestyle Changes:

If a person has been accustomed to a specific incompatible food combination for a long period, consuming it in small quantities may not immediately trigger a disease, particularly in individuals who engage in regular physical exercise, consume fatty foods, possess strong digestive power, and are physically robust. Unhealthy foods or habits should not be discontinued abruptly; rather, they should be abandoned gradually. Similarly, healthy foods should be introduced into the diet gradually—at intervals of one, two, or three days. Abruptly discontinuing unhealthy foods and simultaneously adopting healthy ones may lead to ailments stemming from the sudden disruption of established physiological *Satmya* (habituation) and the introduction of *Asatmya* (unfamiliarity).

### Food Ethics from the Indian Perspective:

In Indian philosophy, food ethics is a very wide and deep concept that goes beyond physical nutrition; instead, it is very much a part of the human mind, character, and spiritual growth. Here, food (*Ahara*) is seen as a powerful factor that shapes a person's physical and mental health. In the Indian philosophical tradition, what we put into our body is very much a practice of *Dharma*—righteousness, nonviolence, purity, moderation, and social responsibility. At the base of what we think about food ethics is *Ahimsa* (non-violence). In Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain philosophy, *Ahimsa* is put forward as a primary principle, which is the precept of not causing unnecessary pain to any living being. Also, it is a vegetarian diet that is put forth as the more ethical choice. This attention to what we put into our bodies is very present in Jainism, which eschews even root vegetables for that very reason, as it causes harm to very small organisms. Thus, the choice of food becomes a moral issue, an expression of empathy and care for all forms of life. In Indian philosophy, the practice of *Mitahara* (moderation in food) is very important. We see that that which is beyond what is healthy is a form of gluttony and that which is harmful to both body and mind. Also, the yoga scriptures put forth that, for a healthy life, a diet that is moderate and balanced is what one should aim for. Also, it is put forth that eating moderately and in balance is key to health. As for food ethics, they are very much a part of social and environmental responsibility. It is a noble virtue to share food (*Dana*), and to feed the hungry is a religious duty. Also, at the same time, there is great stress placed on the production and consumption of food, which is in balance with the natural world.

A major problem in today's world is that most food vendors—lacking knowledge of chemistry, the potential chemical interactions between different food items, Ayurveda, or modern science—are violating fundamental dietary principles. Consequently, severe ailments have begun to plague nearly every household. Food is, therefore, a critically important subject; if we do not heighten our awareness regarding it—and if we fail to properly adhere to the principles of science and Ayurveda—we face the looming threat of grave danger in the near future. Indeed, it is conceivable that such dietary practices could even trigger a widespread epidemic.

If the inherent properties and quality of food items are compromised—that is, if they are not wholesome—it will inevitably exert various adverse effects on our bodies, leading to deteriorating health. We may well witness a future where our coming generations are completely overwhelmed by disease and infirmity. The ethics of food—specifically addressing the issue of adulteration—demand greater scrutiny. While consumers who procure food from others must certainly exercise vigilance, those who serve food to the public—whether for profit or gratuitously—bear an equal responsibility to ensure that their food is prepared in a proper and wholesome manner. If we prepare food without adhering to scientific standards or Ayurvedic principles, we invite various diseases upon ourselves; furthermore, since our entire well-being is inextricably linked to the food we consume, it is imperative that each of

us becomes acutely conscious of *what* we are eating and that we conscientiously fulfill our moral obligations when serving food to others.

### Conclusion:

Food philosophy primarily explores human dietary habits, the nature of food, food ethics, and the intricate relationship between food, the body, the mind, and society. It goes beyond merely dictating what one should or should not eat; rather, it teaches us the *why*, *when*, and *how* of eating. The central tenet of food philosophy is that food serves as the very foundation of our lives. As stated in the Upanishads and Ayurveda, "Food is Brahman" (the Ultimate Reality); this signifies that food does not merely provide physical nourishment but also plays a pivotal role in our mental and spiritual development. Through the classification of foods into *Sattvic*, *Rajasic*, and *Tamasic* categories, food philosophy guides us in making appropriate dietary choices, advocating the consumption of healthy and balanced meals. Integral to food philosophy is the concept of food ethics, which teaches us that food is not meant solely for individual consumption. It advocates the elimination of food wastage, the adoption of eco-friendly dietary practices, and the cultivation of compassion toward all living beings. Above all, it emphasizes the consumption of "right food"—specifically, unadulterated sustenance—to nourish the human body. It is this quality of food that ultimately helps us attain robust health; indeed, it is often said that just as medicine cures disease, food itself acts as a form of medicine in every respect. In exploring food philosophy, we observe that diverse regions exhibit a wide array of human dietary habits. These habits are inextricably intertwined with local culture and social characteristics; consequently, by examining these dietary patterns, we gain insight into the history, lifestyle, and environmental context of that specific society.

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