



Diet, The American Dilemma (Excerpt from “Sun, Moon & Earth”)

By Mas Vidal

Growing Epidemics of Mind-Body Fracturing

There is no question that obesity is a growing epidemic in America and around the world, particularly in the last thirty years. Obesity is the second leading cause of preventable death, after smoking. The United States leads the world in obesity, which affects over 30% of the population. Obesity among adolescents has tripled. This is not a disease brought on by an infection or foreign agent, but is attributed to lack of cardiovascular function or type-two diabetes. It is also a lifestyle issue of over-eating and large food portions.

Ayurvedic physician Sushruta correlated obesity to diabetes and heart disease thousands of years ago. The main causes of obesity relate directly to lifestyle, with people becoming more sedentary in addition to eating meat-based diets. When will Americans learn that fixed and strict diets don't work?

Everyone has to eat and the concept of one diet that works for everyone is another American dream. This is where the wisdom of Ayurveda's tri-dosha science is very effective. It endorses eating a diet specifically attuned to our individual constitutional (*prakriti*) needs and nature's seasonal cycle.

What is American food? It's everything and anything we want to eat, as we do not have a staple food. Such variety plays havoc on our stomachs, the most sensitive organ in the body. The American diet is influenced by a diverse range of cultures and countries, as is also the case with large urban areas that attract a diverse population. These buffet-style diets disturb and over-burden the human digestive system, never really giving it a chance to get acclimated or habituated to a type of food. Such is the crux of the ever-expanding body and the weakening of the digestive fire or *jatharagni*.

These destructive dietary patterns are no longer limited to America, but are slowly developing in all major international cities, as globalization continues. Only the adoption of a natural system like Ayurveda can save us. Yoga preaches simple living, and Ayurveda preaches a simple diet and seasonal eating. Yoga recommends fasting occasionally on fresh juices and teas, and both sciences adhere to a vegetarian diet and cooking with herbs and spices. Even though vegetarianism is regarded as vital to

purifying the mind and body, meat is eaten in Ayurveda in cases of specific medical conditions.

Food Consumerism

A plant-based or vegetarian diet has become a growing part of our mainstream culture. Many studies have proven it can lead to greater health. A greater number of people are choosing to eat vegetarian because it makes sense intellectually. Vegetarianism is also tied into the growing environmental or “green” movement. A community of people who are living more consciously is emerging as the voice of environmental issues, and their influence is also extending to medicine and politics.

Well-researched studies have proven that meat is difficult to digest, contains toxins present in the blood of the animals, and is high in fats that can promote diabetes and increase cholesterol and the incidence of heart disease. According to yoga and Ayurvedic principles, meat is considered a low nutritional grade, karma-increasing (*tamasic*) food that has many health implications and is contrary to the principle of nonviolence.

A common problem with the standard American diet is *quantity*. Meals are simply too large and highly caloric. Large quantities of food consumed at a single meal bog down the digestive system. If the meal includes red meat, it slows the system even more, leading to increased weight and body fat.

Animals raised in feedlots, like 43% of the world's beef, accumulate omega 6 fatty acids,¹ a family of unsaturated fatty acids (“bad fats”) that have been linked with cancer, diabetes, obesity, and immune disorders. Approximately 70% of all antibiotics in the United States are fed to pigs, poultry, and cattle, to increase growth and to counter sanitation issues caused by animals being confined to atrocious living conditions. The US is the largest consumer of beef in the world. In 2001, Eric Schlosser published his book *Fast Food Nation*, which gives a very raw account of today's factory-farm system.

There are many ecological drawbacks to producing meat as well. The amount of water and land required is enormous. Meat products have to be trucked great distances as farms and slaughterhouses are located in less costly commercial and rural areas.

In a *New York Times* article, “Rethinking the Meat Guzzler,” Mark Bittman writes, “Americans eat about the same amount of meat as we have for some time, about eight ounces a day, roughly twice the global average. At about 5 percent of the world's population, we ‘process’ (that is, grow and kill) nearly 10 billion animals a year, more than 15 percent of the world's total.” Bittman is the author of a great book entitled *How to Cook Everything Vegetarian*, with many simple recipes for those looking for alternatives to a meat-based diet. The repercussions of America's approach to diet are clear and obviously a major cause of many chronic diseases and our dependence on a healthcare system with major disparities.

¹ Some medical research suggests that excessive levels of n-6 fatty acids, relative to n-3 fatty acids, may increase the probability of a number of diseases and depression. Chronic excessive production of n-6 is associated with heart attacks, thrombotic stroke, arrhythmia, arthritis, osteoporosis, inflammation, mood disorders, and cancer.

Changing the Diet Trend

There are many things we can do to begin to change our health and our society's habits. The first and foremost is to change your own diet and set an example for others to live by. Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "Be the change that you want to see in the world." Others will follow your example. I have seen how my own example has influenced many others to eat less meat, because, as a vegetarian, I excelled as a competitive athlete and was able to maintain substantial muscle mass, disproving a common myth about a non-meat diet. The myth of needing a high-quantity protein diet will eventually be dispelled, but many Americans now have little education on where to find protein in non-meat foods, like almonds, lentils, eggs, and many types of grains. Meat-eating societies have become fearful of not maintaining enough protein in their diets out of fear of losing muscle mass and strength: another huge myth. In fact, most Americans and meat-eaters in general eat more protein than they can actually digest, bogging the digestive organs down and stressing the liver and kidneys.

According to Ayurvedic principles each constitutional type (*dosha*) has different requirements in order to keep balance of the elements (air, fire, water, earth). The tri-dosha system is comprised of vata (air), pitta (fire) and kapha (water and earth) and each has its unique qualities that influence the body and mind.

Vata types are influenced by the central nervous system and, having the lowest amount of body fat and muscular density, are delicate and can be sensitive and generally very lean. As a result they can benefit most from bulking foods such as dairy products, pastas, oils, and nuts, which are higher in fat and calories. *Vata* types have a tendency to struggle when digesting large portions, or dry or cold foods, as their digestive fires can be a bit weak. Therefore, it is best if they eat warm, cooked, hearty foods.

Pitta types are hot. Being muscular and very focused, with strong digestive systems, usually get away with eating anything they like. As their digestion is viscous, they usually fall prey to over-eating at meals. Fruits, vegetables, grains, and cooling green salads are good for these fire types.

Kapha types are stable, naturally hold more body fat and tend to eat more slowly and frequently. Their digestive systems are generally the most consistent, but in the evening they should try to eat foods that minimize dairy content, oil, salt, and most particularly starch, such as breads, pastas, potatoes and so on.

There are specific foods from each food group—nuts, legumes, grains, fruits, vegetables, and dairy—that each dosha should be cautioned against during appropriate seasons and in certain locations. Much of this can be found in Ayurvedic cookbooks, and is usually also included in consultations with practitioners.

"One-for-all" fixed diet plans don't work, because they force different body types with different metabolisms to adjust to the same foods. Much is compromised by forcing individuals to adhere to foods that do not accord with the elements and qualities of their dosha. One of Ayurveda's basic, essential dietary wisdom tenets is learning which foods are most beneficial to your system, according to the season, in order to attain balanced

digestion. It is crucial to follow dietary rules that take a person's imbalances (*vikriti*) into account, in order not to create discomfort and disease.

There are a number of simple things that can help change current diet trends when purchasing food. Buying from local farmers at weekly markets or small independent stores insures that you are supporting smaller family-owned companies that place more attention on quality than quantity. Buying fresh, organic, seasonal foods is also important, as many larger food companies freeze and spray foods with wax-type preservatives to extend shelf life. The use of pesticides has become a prominent concern, as we now recognize how taste and nutritional value are compromised. As companies find more ways to make money, consumer health suffers.

When possible, we should avoid purchasing canned or packaged foods that have lost their life force (*prana*) and capacity to nourish the immune system (*ojas*). I feel that one of main issues with health in the US and most large cities is immune-system depletion largely as a result of poor diets that lack real nutrition or prana. Another fact previously discussed is the over-dependence on stimulants, such as coffee, that curb the appetite, and similarly on the many weight-loss products that tax the adrenals.

Shopping for food more frequently and purchasing it in smaller quantities insure that the food you eat is fresh and will not spoil. It is hard to imagine how much food is wasted in many households and the commercial restaurant industry, when approximately 35 million people in United States, the wealthiest country in the world, live in poverty. The western mentality of over-sized over-abundance and over-accumulation will, I hope, gradually change in many respects, from diet to lifestyle. Westerners must learn to find contentment in simplicity and happiness from the inside out, as we continue to create new values that are based on intangibles and lifestyles that connect us to each other and nature.

When dining out, try to choose restaurants that are more *sattvic*, a Sanskrit word that refers to organic, vegetarian foods cooked by peaceful people in places owned by individuals who make an effort to live in an ethical and sustainable manner. The energetic value of food cannot be ignored on the path to higher consciousness. The great Saint Sri Ramakrishna once rejected food that was served to him because the energy it was infused with during preparation was impure and lacked balanced, positive vibrations. He could feel it, and so can we if we realign our mind-body relationship.

We must become more conscious buyers and take greater responsibility for the choices we make and the influence they may have upon others. Conscious food choices support sustainable agriculture and farms' ability to produce food for an indefinite period without causing severe damage to the ecosystem. Sustainability is vital with respect to health, poverty, and the future evolution of this planet. Sustainability's two key aspects are biophysical, long-term effects on the soil, and socio-economic, farmers' ability to manage their farms fairly and justly. Sustainable agriculture, a farming method that is growing rapidly worldwide, depends on replenishing the soil while minimizing the use of non-renewable resources.

The Solution

What I present in this book is the application of an education based on universal law and the wisdom of the Ancients. As taught in the yoga and Ayurveda traditions, this wisdom is founded on an integral relationship between the mind, body, and soul that reflects the grander relationship of the sun, moon, and earth. The blind can no longer lead the blind, unless we prefer self-denial and self-destruction. We must rely more on time-tested scientific methods not concocted by any particular individual, but which represent the truths the sun, moon, and earth demonstrate to us. We could say their relationship is the voice of the Divine.

Yoga and Ayurveda reflect the scientific truths and universal laws that govern the planet earth. They provide us with an innovative approach and insights that can help humanity solve the mystery of creation. Ancient wisdom encourages us to embark on a lifestyle revolution. The Vedas make the bold proclamation that all beings emancipate themselves to realize that Divinity is their birthright. This is about directing our energy back to ourselves so that each and every individual in this world will begin to take responsibility for his or her own life and partake in the burgeoning relationship between our spirit and nature.

We must take these steps with courage. Without great courage and social and personal independence, mankind will remain attached to the idea that solutions to health, strife, inequality, and peace can be attained through outer change, something outside of one's own mind-body-consciousness relationship. Vedic wisdom (*vidya*) is based on self-empowerment as the windows and doorways to discovering our Higher Self. Our minds must be clear, visionary, and embrace the power of the light to see through the "windows" of life's ever-changing experiences. The body serves us as a vehicle for personally responsible actions as we walk through the "doorways" of opportunity and growth to follow our highest dharma, self-realization.

It may seem that, as the demand for the magical, mystical wisdom of the East grows, the world seems to be regressing at the same time. There is some truth to this as not everyone is evolving in a pure or sattvic direction equally.

It is clear that the greater majority of the world seeks to find peace and happiness in new ways that bring more abundance, consistency, and everlasting joy. The world is designed in such a way that we can learn through repeated effort. If we do not learn our lesson through a certain experience, there will always be another opportunity. We learn and change through pain and suffering. Positive discoveries arrive from having experienced the negative, and so the forces of nature provide the power to transcend the cycles of birth and death (*samsara*).

Yoga shows us the occult relationship these positive and negative energies share with the individual and the cosmos, while Ayurveda demonstrates their use in the practical relationship between our physiology and nature. Together, yoga and Ayurveda bridge the gap between mind and body, empowering us to experience freedom and to enjoy life, while remaining aware of its true purpose.

To the lay person or outsider, these teachings seem to present a type of connection-separation, positive-negative, attraction-repulsion paradox. For devotees, yoga practices and lifestyle routines follow fixed instructions and conform to scriptural laws. Sri Ramakrishna says that one given the blessed insight of understanding the grander nature of Divinity in all things follows "...the process of negation and affirmation. First he negates the world, realizing that it is not Brahman²; but then he affirms the same world, seeing it as the manifestation of Brahman. To give an illustration: a man or woman wanting to climb to the roof first negates the stairs as not being the roof, but on reaching the roof he or she finds that the stairs are made of the same materials as the roof. Then he or she can either move up and down the stairs or remain on the roof, as he or she pleases."

When our lessons are not resolved by way of truth or in accordance with dharmic law, catastrophic disaster can occur, as we have witnessed with the many wars throughout the world. Often, as we make efforts to stop external war, we seem to avoid its source and the realization that the battle is within us. All that we seek lies within us. The ancients lived in this manner and complete harmony with nature's laws.

The lifestyle principles of yoga and Ayurveda redefine the role of the individual. This is a process of transforming the way that we think of ourselves and how we live in a world we share with others. Are we becoming more aware of our thoughts, choices, decisions, and the environment we are creating? Are we fulfilling our highest purpose in life by honoring our truth? These are some of the questions we must ask ourselves.

The four ideals or Vedic dharmas of life provide us a platform for balanced and purposeful living through objective and subjective awareness and compassion for all living beings. This is represented in one of the great mantras of the Upanishads, "Aum Shanti, Shanti, Shanti." In objective awareness, we remain uninfluenced by the traditions, belief systems and opinions of others. We remain simply observers of the world as we exercise our own reason, will, and activity, and allow the grace and flow of the Divine to guide us.

In subjective awareness, we use our relationships with people, places, and things as opportunities for inner reflection and contemplation, seeing the Divine hand behind the things we can't always understand or make sense of. This type of awareness requires greater discipline, as the mind and body must partake of the world while at same time maintaining an objective attitude.

Lastly, through compassion for all life we realize that, as we serve, give to, and love others, we provide the same back to ourselves. Through respect for others, we recognize the Divine and sublime shines through all souls.

In Vedic astrology (*jyotish*), there are Four Dharmas or aims and ideals that bring us into balanced living. They are: *Kama*, the emotional, devotional and affectionate aspects that nurture us as sentient beings; *Artha*, the acquisition and use of tangible, material objects for practical needs' *Dharma itself*, which gives meaning to our endeavors to live a

² The source of pure existence, consciousness, and bliss. Brahman is the term for the "creative" force, which is part of the Hindu trinity of life's existence. The word "God" is the English equivalent of Brahman.

purposeful; fulfilling life; and *Moksha*, the movement towards enlightenment. These are various aspects of a life we all need to live holistically.