

Yogic Diet, Trigunas and Mental Health: Implications for Research

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Abstract

A *guna* is one's quality or tendency. Yoga Science and Ayurvedic Medicine have classified *gunas* into three: *rajas*, *tamas* and *sattwa*; each with its own characteristics. In any person, though all the three are found, one of them is dominant. The data collected through the senses that pass through the mind and intellect is modified according to the dominant *guna*. Thus, *guna* is the final step which influences the personality of a person. The type of food one takes influences the dominant *guna*. Yoga Science enumerates the food items that promote a particular *guna*. Thus, diet has implications for understanding a person's psychological functioning. Implications for mental health and counseling are discussed.

Keywords: Yogic diet, *gunas*, *trigunas*, mental health

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The concept of *guna*, in the philosophical context, refers to addressing quality, substance, tendency and property. A *guna*, in a human being, thus refers to her/his quality or tendency. The body is composed of five elements that influence any change, whether it is physical, mental, or psychological, that occurs in a human being. Through the five physical senses, these five elements are perceived in the body. The data collected through the senses that pass through the mind and intellect is modified according to the dominant *guna*. Thus, *guna* is the final step which influences the personality of a person (Srivastava, 2012; Lele, 2012).

Three *gunas* or qualities, known as *trigunas*, are recognized in Yoga. The concept of *Triguna* has embedded the development of consciousness. In the modern era too, personality is explained with the notion of *triguna*. According to yoga science and ayurvedic medicine the three *gunas* are classifications of quality of energy in all things. The three *gunas* are *rajas*, *tamas* and *sattwa*, and are associated with different kinds of temperaments. Each *guna* has its own nature of thinking, feeling and acting. The trigunas describe our behavior, mindset, health, and diet.

Rajas is characterized by feelings of excitement, being energized and full of activity. There is also often a certain degree of restlessness and mental agitation. The Bhagavad Gita portrays *Rajasguna* as the “active quality”. *Rajas* is a *guna* that is associated with passion and desire, and is found to be the source of greediness, undertaking activity, restlessness, and desire. A person who has a *rajas guna* as dominant is longings for fruits of his/her deeds and is full of attachment. The self-interest which is the dominant trait gives the intellect, a distorted picture of what is right and wrong. This *guna* cannot foster renunciation and detachment rather its attributes are more towards activity, enthusiasm and interest.

Tamas is associated with feelings of lethargy, heaviness, and inertia. This *guna* runs on the principle of inertia, and hope and illusion are the basis of this *guna*. *Tamas* produces

ambiguity, idleness, fantasy, and persistence. Individual's who have a dominant *tamasguna* are usually thoughtful, anxious, and relentless. The cynicism, perseverance, fantasy and ambiguity are some of the qualities of this *guna*

The third quality, *sattwa* is characterized by feelings of expansiveness, joyfulness, lightness, and being the witness to one's life. *Sattwa guna* comprises the "spiritual quality". Individuals who have this *guna* as dominant, possesses an inherent quality of being good and caring. There is a resolute constancy of the mind and the senses. When *sattva* is dominant, wisdom is predominant in the individual. The wisdom in *Sattvic* person helps the individual distinguish between the desirable and undesirable, the dutiful and undutiful actions. Divine and spirituality are some of the values inculcated in *Sattvic* people. (Rama, 1985).

In its model of a development of human potential the Bhagawat Gita describes the three *gunas*. The Gita asserts that a person is a combination of varying degrees of the three *gunas* and cannot be completely of one type. The three *gunas* are responsible for the different kinds of temperament and are influenced by the physiological and psychological parameters. The trigunas are the central aspects of personality in the Yoga philosophy. Yoga helps to "to master all the senses, including stabilizing the mind" (Shankar et al., 2017). Yoga is a way of life. According to Yoga philosophy a disciplined pure and focused, mind can help succeed in any field, be it education, worldly affairs, or self-awareness (Taneja, 2014). Yoga aids in a healthy lifestyle for harmony, peace and happiness.

A satisfied mind helps to think calmly, cleanly, and creatively, and to solve life's problems effectively. The properties of the traits are needed to make these solutions work, and the *tamas* to put an end to the activities when the problem is actually solved. Imbalance between the three *gunas* lead to somatic and body-mind imbalances (Bagus, 2020) is responsible. Thus, the *gunas* have implications for physical and mental health.

The three *gunas* guard the five sheaths or the Pancha Koshas. Food and diet play a significant role in the formation Pancha Koshas especially the Annamaya Kosha or the food sheath. (Dalal & Misra, 2010). Nurturing the physical body, and also has an impact on levels of energy, mind, intelligence, emotions, and spirit. Changes in diet, in addition to sedentary lifestyles, mental illness, stress, pollution, smoking, and alcohol consumption, have led to the development of non-communicable diseases over the past 10 decades (Singh et al., 2011). We face a huge challenge with cheap, easily accessible, unhealthy food and on the other, hand there are some modern medical nutrition policies which are inaccessible to the poor. Understanding different food groups and their nutrient content, as well as incorporating them into daily eating habits, seems difficult to calculate caloric requirements, and this requires expert guidance. So, it seems a practical and simple solution to mix a yogic diet and a balanced diet of nutrition to achieve a holistic diet.

The yogic diet has five principles of yoga. Eating right will improve one's health and help the person cleanse himself and feel fit. A yogic diet accompanied by yoga practice helps in keeping the mind and body fit. (The Yoga Mandala, 2020).

Classification of Food

Our physical and mental health are, to a significant extent, influenced by the food we eat. Mind is formed out of the refined portion of food. The way a food is prepared influences the *guna* it promotes. Usually fresh vegetarian food promotes *sattvic* nature. Adding chillies, over cooking or frying makes it *rajasic*. It becomes *tamasic* when it is cooked and kept for too long. Foods that increase the energy of the body are *rajasic* and those that decrease the energy of the body are *tamasic* (Tarlton, 2020).

Sattvic Food

This food nourishes and keeps the body calm. It helps purify the mind, allowing it to function to its fullest capacity. *Sattvic* food also enhances our awareness, inspires us to take up positive actions, meditate more deeply and release our hidden potential and creativity (Shankar et al., 2017).

Cereals, whole grain bread, fresh fruits and vegetables, pure fruit juices, milk, butter and cheese, legumes, nuts, seeds, sprouted seeds, honey and herbal tea are some of the *Sattvic* food.

Rajasic Food

These are also called stimulant foods. Hot, bitter, acidic, dry or salty foods are included in the category of rajasic diet. They disturb the mind-body balance. By feeding the body with rajasic food will overstimulate the body, stimulate passions, leaving the mind restless and uncontrollable. This food is not completely beneficial. However, they are not harmful. Spices or strong herbs, and stimulants such as coffee and tea, fish, spicy foods, eggs, salt and chocolates are included in rajasic food.

Tamasic Food

This is otherwise called sedative or static food. A *Tamasic* diet is neither beneficial to the mind nor the body. This kind of diet, withdraws the Prana or energy, mitigates the power of reasoning and induces inertia. Tamasic food reduces the body's resistance to disease. It fills the mind with emotions like anger and greed. They are helpful during times of physical stress and pain. They dull the pain and lower consciousness. Over eating too is considered tamasic.

Meat, alcohol, tobacco, onions, garlic, fermented foods such as vinegar, stale overripe substances and the like are included in *Tamasic* food.

Discussion

Ayurveda, is a parallel science to yoga, according to Ayurveda health is a state of balance between the body, mind, and the consciousness. In the ancient days, food also consumed as a medicine. People understood the principles of healthy eating and the healing properties of food. (3HO Foundation, 2020). An Ayurvedic proverb states “when diet is wrong, medicine is of no use. When diet is right, there is no need for medicine”. This points to the idea that diet can impact not only the body but also one’s psychological functioning.

Mental health is characterized by realizing one’s potential, coping with normal stresses of life, working productively and making contribution to society. Mental health comprises of the emotional, behavioural and cognitive well-being; hence it defines how one thinks, feels, and behaves. Mental health also determines one’s capability to handle stress, using problem solving skills and making decisions and make choices (MentalHealth.gov, 2020). These characteristics correspond to *Sattvaguna*. *Tamasic* food affects reasoning and promotes dark emotions like anger. *Rajasic* food interferes with the mind-body balance making one uncontrollable and restless. Hence, we could infer that these two foods affect the mental health of a person. *Sattvic* food nourishes both body and mind, keeping them in a balanced state. This food aids in increasing positive actions, meditating more deeply and releasing our hidden potential and creativity. Thus, this food is likely to enhance the mental health.

Imbalance in the body-mind relationship can lead to mental disturbance. Hence, it could be assumed that a certain type of food like *rajasic* or *tamasic* can promote certain mental disturbances.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a childhood disorder, characterized by persistent overactivity, impulsivity and difficulties in sustaining attention. Probably *rajasic*

food may strengthen this condition. Hence a change in the diet can to be explored. A *Sattvic* diet that includes fruits and vegetables, whole grains, unsaturated fats, and protein can reduce the hyperactive symptoms. Balancing healthy eating with plenty of physical activity could reduce the symptoms (Harvard Health Publishing, 2009).

Anxiety disorders are functional in nature in which anxiety is the main symptom or is experienced when the person attempts to control certain maladaptive behaviours. There are four types of symptoms of anxiety. One is physiological arousal like racing heart, perspiring, and tensed muscles. The second is cognitive symptoms like selective attention, threat-oriented cognition etc. The third symptom is behavioural like avoidance and the fourth is emotional symptom like dread (Smith et al., 2003). These tendencies may be prompted by *rajasic* or *tamasic* foods. *Sattvic* food keeps it in a peaceful state, calms and cleanses the mind, allowing it to function to its full capacity. Hence, the effect of *sattvic* food on the symptoms of anxiety could be studied. According to Francis et al. (2019) there was an improvement both anxiety and depression when dietary changes are made.

Another most prevalent disorder is depression. This disorder affects the bodily functions, behaviours, thoughts and emotions. Research shows that eating a healthy diet, which is low in processed food and includes fruits and vegetables can help reduce symptoms of depression. A study by Francis et al. (2019) found that brief dietary intervention can decrease the symptoms of depression in young adults. Adhering to diet has an impact on symptoms of depression, mood, self-efficacy and memory.

While the impact of diet on the *gunas* is interesting, diet alone is not a contributing factor. It has to be studied whether diet is a mediating factor or a cause. Also it would be interesting to study if introducing *rajasic* food, like an anti-depressant, would help in counseling a depressed person. The overall improvement of diet and nutrition is necessary for a good physical and psychological health.

Conclusion

The concept of *triguna* helps understand the nature of personality. *Sattvaguna* can promote mental health while *rajas* and *tamas* can influence mental disturbance. The dominant *guna* influences one's cognitive, emotional and social functioning. The way a food is prepared influences the *guna* it promotes. Fresh vegetarian food promotes *sattvic* nature while adding chilies, over cooking or frying makes it *rajasic*. When it is cooked and kept for too long, it becomes *tamasic*. Foods that increase the energy of the body are *rajasic* and those that decrease the energy of the body are *tamasic*. While it could be stated that the type of food influences a *guna*, how much the type of food alone contributes to psychological factors like cognition, thinking, emotion etc. needs to be explored in depth. The physiological mechanisms of how diet can improve symptoms of anxiety, depression etc. also needs in-depth study.

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