

AHARA RASA: Nourishing the Body and Mind

In Ayurveda, the physiological and psychological functions of the body are known to be intricately and inherently woven. Cosmic energy and universal matter are at once intertwined in our foods, thoughts, and activities. The body is sustained by prana, the life breath, and annam, the earth's food. Breath and food influence the tissues of the body and the thoughts of the mind. Both are transmuted into the cosmic essences through the physical processes of ingestion, digestion, assimilation, and evacuation. In this way, breath and food become the eternal juice for procreation, the ingredient which sprouts love and joy. Through an enormously sophisticated process of chemical reactions, spurred by both the energy quanta of the foods and the energy vibrations of bodily tissues and mental thoughts, the nutrient, called ahara rasa, is produced. This nutrient, once absorbed into the digestive tract, is synthesized by the digestive fire to form the first of the seven tissues - rasa dhatu. Before the nutrients infiltrate a particular dhatu, they pass through a prismic vibrational membrane, called kala. Heated by the body's tissue fire, the nutrients are further transformed by the body crystal, which, by projecting a spectrum of vibrations, permeates the receiving tissue while it is being fed.

When the nutrients of food and mind are wholesome, the prismic membrane is clear and luminous; when the nutrients are polluted, they cloud and may even block the prism completely. Essentially, while the rasa dhatu is being formed, the universal vibrations of joy and exhilaration - prana - transpire into the organ-

ism through the prismic membrane infusing nature from within. When rasa is being replenished in the body, we experience a lift in spirit as the pure essences of nature are received into the body. If, however, the nutrients are unwholesome, rasa dhatu exudes sadness and grief, rather than joy, and these negative emotions quickly pervade the entire organism. As rasa feeds the blood, the joy mounts into exquisite exhilaration. The body, mind, and spirit surge forth to become boundlessly exuberant with abundant life.

In the words of Charaka, the use of naturally healthy foods is essential to the quality of nutrients responsible for sustaining a healthy organism. "The availability and consumption of a wholesome diet are imperative to promote the healthy growth of a person; likewise, indulgence in unwholesome foods promotes diseases." Equally relevant is the recognition that mental unrest or a negative disposition contaminates even the most wholesome foods once these have been ingested.

Ayurveda has identified seven dhatus, constituent tissues, mentioned earlier, whereby the body both lives and dies. Dhatus, like doshas, are formed from the five elements. With the help of the digestive fire, the dhatus form the body's protective biological system. We will study the dhatus further in the next series of Wise Earth Ayurveda.

Rasa - Sense of Taste: Safeguarding Immunity

Rasa is the primordial essence of healing within the body. It gives us the unique ability of taste through which we can safeguard our immunity. Rasa, a Sanskrit word, means "taste" but also "sap, juice, elixir, essence" as well as "love, feeling, esthetic sentiment." Our sense of taste allows us to "taste" the entire world, making it possible to fulfill all of our desires. These "tastes" refer to all the impressions that are experienced, not only by the tongue, but by all the sense organs—the nose, eyes, ears, and skin. We may "taste" the emotions of joy or sorrow, fear or courage, just as we may "taste" music - a form of sonic taste that reaches the most profound depths of our being. Because we can experience prana, tejas, and ojas, primordial conditions of the universe, mentioned earlier, through Mother Nature's food, it is said to be rasa. Taste plays a critical role in nurturing, nourishing, and

healing the body. It is a vital part of the process of nutrition. This complex chain of reactions begins with the sensory perception of taste, which leads to the mental reception of it by the brain cells, which beckon the appetite. The seers describe appetite as the total intelligence of the body acting in accord with its external surroundings. Thus, food is desired, ingested, digested, and returned to the earth in a natural, harmonious cycle. The food sadhanas developed by Maya Tiwari not only impart rasa, but also nourish and sustain our life force and internal sound. Every bite we eat, every motion and sound we make in the spirit of sadhana, invokes the universe's vibration, energy, and memory. Pounding the husk off whole grain with a large mortar and pestle invokes and strengthens the rhythmic beat of the heart. As you take to pounding the grains - bom, bom, bom - you will feel the vibration of your heart awakening. Sifting grains and beans in a straw basket to remove the husks and stones created a soothing sound that helped to restore the fluidity of your prana. The shwee, shwee, shwee of sifting grain will winnow out the discordant thoughts in your mind. The sound and movement of cutting vegetables along their growth lines to emphasize their anatomical forms will sharpen your senses.

Six Tastes and Their Effects

According to the principle of rasa, there are six essential natural tastes: sweet, salty, sour, pungent, bitter, and astringent. The six tastes originate from the transformation of the five elements within nature's six seasons with the water element as their principal foundation. Water is the basis that sustains all of life. Without water, there can be no taste and, without taste, we cannot remember our union with Mother Nature. When nature's intrinsic taste is tampered with, it loses its ability to transmit the vibrations that our system needs to replenish our physical, emotional, and spiritual rhythms. All six of nature's tastes are necessary for our immunologic and spiritual functions. The tastes of the foods we eat has a critical influence on our consciousness and health. Every cell, atom, and molecule in the body has a rudimentary response to each of the six tastes. According to Swmaini Mayatananda, this response functions through a set of vibrational memories intrinsic to each one of the vital tissues. Taste operates through a complex chain of responses in the process of digestion which starts for some time before we ingest the food.

The perception of mind and senses play a paramount role in the way we respond to a specific taste. Smell, sound, touch, appearance of the food stimulate the brain to produce digestive juices necessary to imbibe the food and fulfill our desire. Likewise, the process of taste does not end directly after digestion. Each of the six tastes sustain good health when applied to our nutrition in a way that honors their seasonal and cyclical nature. Each taste, when expressed in foods, contributes to life in a different and quantitative way. The sweet taste is the most dominant in the universe, comprising more than seventy percent of all foods in nature existing on the earth, due to its nurturing, building and sustaining nature. The five remaining tastes - sour, salty, pungent, bitter, and astringent - are supporting principles and are used primarily as accents and condiments to food and life. The exception here is when these tastes are naturally dominant in a particular food, e.g., the sour taste of grapefruit; the natural salt in most watery vegetables, such as zucchini and cabbage, and the pungency of ginger root, garlic, peppers, and most herbs. Bitter exists in foods like vegetable and salad greens, while as alkaloids and glycosides, it exists predominantly in herbs and medicines. The astringent principle is fundamental to medicines, as in the tannin of barks, for example. It may also be found in foods such as uncooked legumes. All six tastes form the basis, in varying degrees, for all the foods and principles of nature. The extent to which each taste is used largely depends on one's dosha, a specific energy pattern that determines our metabolic type. Before you can understand how to balance the six tastes to best suit your nutritional needs, you must first be able to identify your dosha. (For a detailed explanation of the doshas, see Part Two.)

SWEET is the dominant taste of all forms of sustenance, because almost all foods contain some degree of sweetness. Water and earth elements produce the sweet taste, which includes all carbohydrates, sugars, fats, and amino acids. The primary element of life, which is water, is considered sweet, as are milk and all sugars. Sweet increases bodily tissues, nurtures the body, and relieves hunger. Our diets should therefore be proportionately high in good quality “sweet” foods, including grains, root vegetables, and fruits.

PUNGENT, formed from the elements of air and fire, helps stimulate appetite and maintains metabolism and the balance of secretions in the body. This taste is most beneficial for the kapha type and includes such foods as garlic, ginger, kale, mustard, tomatoes, and peppers.

SALTY is most beneficial for the vata type, although it may be used in small quantities by all types as it helps to cleanse bodily tissues and activate digestion. The third most dominant taste, it is formed from the elements of water and fire and is found in all salts and seaweeds. Most watery vegetables, such as tomatoes, zucchini, and cucumber, are naturally high in saline.

SOUR is formed from earth and fire elements and helps digestion and the elimination of wastes from the body. This taste may be used in small quantities by everyone, although it is most beneficial for the vata type. Most fruits are considered sour, with some sweetness. All organic acids and fermented foods, such as yogurt, soy sauce, and pickles, are also considered sour.

BITTER is intended to be used by everyone in small quantity, and is especially good for the pitta and kapha types. Bitter detoxifies the blood, controls skin ailments, and tones the organs. This taste is formed from the elements of air and space and exists in all medicines, alkaloids, glycosides, and bitter foods such as aloe vera, arugula, radicchio, dandelion greens, and the spice turmeric.

ASTRINGENT taste, formed from the elements of earth and air, is intended to be used in medicinal measure by all types. The astringent principle helps to reduce bodily secretion and constrict bodily tissue. Examples of astringent foods are those high in tannin, such as dried legumes and bark teas.

Keep in mind that all food consists of all six tastes, just as each one of us is composed of all five elements and all three doshas. Study of the doshas - an integral part of the science of Ayurveda - teaches that the six tastes should be enjoyed proportionately and in accord with seasonal tastes. As a general rule: Sweet taste should be the most dominant taste in our main meal of the day. Pungent, salty and sour tastes should be used moderately as secondary tastes, depending on the season. Bitter & astringent tastes are always used as minor or accent tastes and should also be increased or decreased according to the particular season. When we do not balance the tastes in our diet, we disturb the body's tissue memory, which, in turn, causes the cells to become so distorted that they transmute themselves into what we call disease.

Three Stages of Taste

Ayurveda principle of taste is observed in three stages. Rasa is the initial stage that registers the sensory stimulation and initial taste of the tongue. Virya determines the heating and cooling energy of the food that occurs during digestion and prepares the digestive system to produce the appropriate metabolic response. Vipaka is the post-digestive taste which reduces the six tastes into three residual tastes of sweet, sour, and pungent. In essence, the sweet, pungent, and sour tastes are the three unchanging tastes from the beginning to the end of the process of rasa. These three final tastes are transported within the nutritive plasma to various organs and tissues of the body. Occasionally certain foods or medicines do not follow these three stages predictably. When foods deviate from the established virya and vipaka, they are referred to as prabhava, the exceptions to the rule. Prabhava is most important in Ayurvedic pharmacology, since many ingredients with prabhava qualities are used to deliberately increase a specific dosha. In Ayurvedic nutrition, we generally attempt to decrease the aggravated dosha to a state of balance within the body. Certain foods, such as honey, bananas, lemons, and onions are classified as prabhava foods.

THE ANATOMY OF THE SIX TASTES

RASA	ELEMENTS	QUALITIES	VIRYA
Sweet	Earth/Water	Oily, Cold, Heavy	Cold
Sour	Earth/Fire	Oily, Hot, Heavy	Hot
Salty	Water/Fire	Oily, Hot, Heavy	Hot
Pungent	Fire/Air	Rough, Hot, Light	Hot
Bitter	Air/Space	Rough, Cold, Light	Cold
Astringent	Air/Earth	Rough, Cold, Light	Cold

RASA (Initial taste)	VIPAKA (Post-Digestive Taste)	EFFECT	MAIN FUNCTION
Sweet	Sweet	increases K, decreases V, P	Increases body tissues
Sour	Sour	increases K, P, decreases V	Increases appetite
Salty	Sweet	increases K, P, decreases V	Makes body limber and cleanses body tissues
Pungent	Pungent	increases P, V, decreases K	Reduces fluid in tissues
Bitter	Pungent	increases V, decreases P, K	Purifies organs and controls skin ailments
Astringent	Pungent	increases V, decreases P, K	Purifies and constricts body

THE THREE STAGES OF TASTE

RASA (Initial taste)	VIRYA (Energy of Food)	VIPAKA (Post-digestive taste)
Sweet	Cold	Sweet
Sour	Hot	Sour
Salty	Hot	Sweet
Pungent	Hot	Pungent
Bitter	Cold	Pungent
Astringent	Cold	Pungent

SUMMARY OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SIX TASTES

Sweet remains sweet
 Sour remains sour
 Pungent remains pungent
 Salty becomes sweet
 Bitter becomes pungent
 Astringent becomes pungent

THE THREE STAGES OF TASTE

Shape, size, color, scent, taste, temperature and season, as well as texture these are the primary indicators used to determine a space, air, fire, water, or earth food.

Like humans, most foods are a combination of two dominant elements, each bearing all five elements to some degree. By observation, we are able to distinguish and use foods that are different from our own nature, and thus maintain a dynamic stasis within our organism. All plants and other life-forms are derived from the water element. Through the process of transmutation, the other four elements also exist in varying degrees. Water gives taste to life, and earth gives scent to it. Fire transforms the shape and visual characteristics of food. Air creates the skin, feel, and texture of the food. Space gives the food sound, hollowness, and resonance. When we learn to plant seeds in our own garden and observe the growth of our grains, vegetables, beans, fruits, and herbs, we become attuned to the nature of each plant. We instinctively become alert to its distinguishing features. A wholesome life is sustained by the excellent marriage of each life-form to its proper food. Food speaks to us. All we need to do is listen to be still and observe the grandeur of nature in every blade of grass. Every food has its innate markings, color, vibration, and taste. The ripe peach shimmers on the tree. It is golden and red. Human lips are caressed by its fine fur before its sweet pulp is released. A red, round, firm apple crackles under our bite. It may be sweet and juicy or tart and firm. A banana turns into mush and lubricates the digestive system. The chili pepper, which bites by sight and scent, consumes the tongue and stomach with fire long after it is eaten. All foods speak to us some loudly, others delicately. Be still and observe. It is best to eat the foods that are in season and that grow either locally or in a similar climate. Occasionally, foods that grow in other climates and terrains may be used for variety and the celebration of our ancestral and universal spirit. More on the six seasons in Part Three.

ELEMENTAL FEATURES OF ALL FOODS

SPACE	AIR	FIRE	WATER	EARTH
Undifferentiated	Mobile	Intense	Cool	Solid
Subtle	Rough	Hot	Dense	Dense
Hollow	Hard	Medium-size	Heavy	Massive
Resonant	Dry	Sharp	Large	Heavy
Translucent	Variable	Light	Moist	Broad
Blue	Fresh	Fluid	Smooth	Large
Cold	Wiry	Oily	Cloudy	Oily
Astringent	Light	Fetid	Sticky	Sour
Pungent	Compact	Red	White	Sweet
	Dark (gray/green)	Orange	Clear	
	Bitter	Pungent	Sweet	
	Astringent	Salty	Salty	

ENERGETICS OF EACH FOOD ARE DETERMINED BY

Shape Size (density/weight/buoyancy)	Color Scent	Taste Temperature/season	Texture Feel (rough/smooth/ airy/chewy)
---	----------------	-----------------------------	---

FIRE FOODS

All hot spices All oily foods All sour/pungent fruits and vegetables	All pickles, vinegars, and salts All acidic foods/medicines All animal foods	All heating grains All nuts All red foods
---	--	---

AIR/SPACE FOODS

Most leafy greens and lettuces All cabbage families All bitter vegetables	All hollow vegetables with tiny seeds* Most nightshade foods Most dry, compact legumes	All dry, rough, stale foods
---	--	-----------------------------

*Except for peppers, which are fire/air/space foods

EARTH/WATER FOODS

All sweet, juicy fruits All salty and sweet watery vegetables	All cool, milky foods	All sticky, cold foods All sweets
--	-----------------------	--------------------------------------

EXAMPLES OF FOODS ACCORDING TO AYURVEDIC ENERGETICS

LETTUCE: AIR/WATER FOOD

Primary element: air	Color: green	Texture: airy, wiry
Secondary element: water	Scent: fresh	Good for Kapha and Pitta types; occasionally for Vata types (with dressing)
Shape: variable	Taste: bitter	
Size: thin, light	Temperature: cool, moist	

RED CHILI PEPPER: FIRE/AIR/SPACE FOOD

Primary element: fire	Size: small, medium, light (with compact seeds)	Taste: pungent, salty
Secondary elements: space/air	Color: red	Temperature: hot
Shape: triangular, hollow (space) and variable	Scent: sharp and penetrating	Texture: smooth, oily
		Good for Kapha types; occasionally for Vata types

CROOKNECK SQUASH: WATER/EARTH FOOD

Primary element: water	Color: yellow, white flesh	Texture: smooth, oily
Secondary element: earth	Scent: sweet	Good for Vata and Pitta types
Shape: crescent	Taste: sweet, astringent	occasionally for Kapha types
Size: medium, buoyant	Temperature: cool	

COCONUT: WATER/EARTH/SPACE FOOD

Primary element: water	Color: brown shell, white flesh	Texture: variable, dry
Secondary element: earth/space	Scent: sweet, milky	Good for Pitta and Vata types
Shape: round	Taste: sweet	
Size: medium, hollow, resonant	Temperature: cool	

ACORN SQUASH: EARTH/WATER FOOD

Primary element: earth	Color: cloudy orange	Texture: smooth, dense
Secondary element: water	Scent: sweet, nutty	Good for Vata and Pitta types
Shape: multi-crescent	Taste: sweet	
Size: medium, large; solid	Temperature: cool	

GREEN BELL PEPPER: AIR/SPACE/FIRE FOOD

Primary element: air and space	Size: medium, small, light (with compact seeds)	Taste: pungent, salty
Secondary element: fire	Color: green	Temperature: hot
Shape: triangular and variable, hollow (space)	Scent: sharp, pungent	Texture: smooth, oily
		Good for Kapha types, occasionally for Pitta types

A REMINDER

Tastes (Rasa) and Energy (Virya) suitable (in order of preference) for each dosha:

Good for Vata: salty, sour, sweet, heating

Good for Pitta: sweet, bitter, astringent, cooling

Good for Kapha: pungent, bitter, astringent, heating

The following list categorizes foods according to their tastes. When a food has only one of the two tastes indicated, and/or has an additional taste, that information is in parentheses. Occasionally, certain additional characteristics appear in italics after a food; these qualities can render an otherwise unallowable food permissible for a particular body type.

TASTES (RASA) AND ENERGY (VIRYA) OF EACH FOOD

VEGETABLES

Sweet/Astringent; Cooling

Asparagus	Green Beans	Spinach (astringent/pungent)
Broccoli	Jerusalem artichoke	Sprouts (astringent/pungent)
Cabbage (pungent)	(astringent, bitter)	Sweet potatoes
Cassava	Lettuce (astringent)	Taro potatoes (salty)
Cauliflower (astringent)	Okra	Winter squash, acorn, buttercup,
Celery (astringent)	Parsnip	butternut, spaghetti
Cucumbers	Peas (pungent)	Zucchini (pungent)
Gourd squash	Potatoes, white (salty)	

Bitter/Astringent; Cooling

Arugula (bitter)	Endive (bitter)	Karela (bitter)
Collards (bitter)	Kale (bitter)	Sprouts (astringent)
Dandelion greens		

Sweet/Pungent; Healing

Artichoke (sweet, astringent)	Eggplant (astringent, bitter)	Peppers (pungent)
Beets	Garlic (pungent)	Plantain (pungent, astringent)
Beet greens	Horseradish (pungent)	Radish (pungent)
Bell peppers (pungent)	Landcress (pungent)	Tomatoes (sour)
Brussel Sprouts (pungent, astringent)	Leeks	Turnips (pungent, astringent)
Burdock root (astringent, bitter)	Mushrooms (sweet, astringent)	Turnip greens (pungent, astringent)
Carrots (pungent, astringent)	Olives, black	Watercress
Daikon (pungent)	Onions	
	Parsley (pungent)	

FRUITS

Sweet/Astringent; Cooling

Apples	Dates (sweet)	Pears
Avocado	Figs, ripe	Prunes (sweet)
Berries	Grapes, purple	Raisins
Coconuts (sweet)	Melon (sweet)	Watermelon

Sour; Cooling

Lemons	Pomegranate (sweet, astringent)	Strawberries (sour, sweet)
Limes (bitter)	Quince (sour, sweet)	Tamarind
Mango, green		

Sweet/Sour; Heating

Cantaloupe (sweet)	Cranberries (sour)	Persimmon
Bananas (sweet, sour)	Mango, ripe (sweet)	Plums
Cherries (sweet, sour)	Peaches	Rhubarb

Sweet/Sour; Cooling

Rhubarb	Strawberries
---------	--------------

GRAINS

Sweet/Astringent; Cooling

Barley	Cereals (sweet)	Wheat Bran (sweet)
Basmati rice (sweet)	Wheat (sweet)	White rice (sweet)

Sweet/Astringent; Heating

Brown rice (sweet)	Corn (sweet, dry)	Oats (sweet, dry)
Buckwheat	Millet (sweet, dry)	Rye
Cornmeal (sweet, dry)	Oat bran (sweet, dry)	Triticale

Pungent/Sweet; Heating

Amaranth	Quinoa (pungent)
----------	------------------

BEANS, LEGUMES AND PEAS

Sweet/Astringent; Cooling

Aduki beans	Lima beans	Split peas
Black beans	Mung dhal	Tofu
Black-eyed peas	Pinto beans	White beans
Chickpeas	Soybeans	

Sweet/Astringent/ Heating

Kidney beans	Navy beans	Urad dhal
Lentils, brown and red	Toor dhal (sweet)	

Pungent/Astringent; Heating

Tempeh

SPICES, HERBS, CONDIMENTS and SEaweEDS

Pungent/Heating

Allspice	Cloves (aromatic)	Parsley
Ajwan	Curry powder (bitter)	Pippali
Anise	Ginger (sweet)	Rosemary (bitter)
Asafoetida	Horseradish	Sage (bitter, astringent)
Basil	Marjoram	Savory
Bayleaf	Mustard seeds	Star anise
Black pepper	Nutmeg	Tarragon (bitter)
Caraway	Oregano	Thyme
Cayenne	Paprika	Turmeric (bitter)
Celery Seed		

Pungent/Sweet; Heating

Cardamom	Garam masala (bitter)	Orange peel (pungent, bitter, aromatic)
Cinnamon (astringent)	Mace	
Fenugreek leaves (bitter)	Onion	

Bitter/Astringent; Heating

Fenugreek seed

**SPICES, HERBS, CONDIMENTS and SEaweEDS
(CONTINUED)**

Salty/Heating

Black salt	Rock salt	Sea salt
------------	-----------	----------

Pungent/Salty; Heating

Most seaweeds

Bitter/Pungent; Cooling

Black cumin	Dill leaves and seeds	Mint leaves (pungent)
Coriander	Peppermint (pungent)	Spearmint (pungent)
Cumin	Neem leaves (bitter)	Wintergreen (pungent)

Sweet/Pungent; Cooling

Saffron (astringent, bitter)	Vanilla (pungent, astringent)
------------------------------	-------------------------------

Sweet; Cooling

Fennel	Rose water
--------	------------

SWEETENERS

Sweet; Cooling

Barley malt (astringent)	Fructose	Sucanat
Brown rice syrup	Fruit juice concentrates (astringent)	Sugarcane juice
Brown sugar (unrefined)	Maple syrup (bitter)	White sugar
Dates		

Sweet; Heating

Honey (astringent)	Jaggery	Molasses (pungent)
--------------------	---------	--------------------

NUTS

Sweet/Astringent; Heating

Almonds (sweet)
Cashews (sweet)
Filberts

Macadamia (sweet)
Peanuts
Pecans

Pine nuts
Pistachios
Walnuts, black or English

SEEDS

Pungent/Sweet; Heating

Chia seeds
Flax seeds (sweet, astringent)

Poppy seeds (astringent)
Pumpkin seeds
(sweet, bitter, astringent)

Sesame seeds (sweet)

Sweet/Astringent; Cooling

Psyllium seeds

Sunflower seeds

TEAS

Sweet/Astringent; Cooling

Alfalfa
Barley (sweet)
Blackberry (astringent)

Borage
Lotus
Nettle (astringent)

Oat straw (sweet)
Raspberry
Strawberry

Bitter/Pungent; Cooling

Chamomile
Chicory (bitter)
Elder flower
Hops
Jasmine

Lavender (pungent)
Lemon grass
Passionflower (bitter)
Pau d' arco (bitter)
Peppermint (pungent)

Peruvian black (pungent)
Spearmint (pungent)
Violet
Wintergreen (pungent)
Yarrow (astringent)

Pungent; Heating

Ajwan
Basil
Calamus (bitter)
Cardamom (sweet)
Cinnamon (sweet, astringent)
Clove

Eucalyptus
Fenugreek (bitter, sweet)
Ginger, dried or fresh (sweet)
Ginseng (bitter, sweet)
Hyssop (bitter)
Juniper berries (bitter, sweet)

Mugwort (bitter)
Orange peel
Osha (bitter)
Pennyroyal
Wild ginger

Astringent/Sweet; Heating

Burdock (astringent, bitter)

Hawthorne (sweet, sour)

Hibiscus

Bitter/Sweet; Cooling

Chrysanthemum
Dandelion
Licorice

Marshmallow (sweet)
Red clover
Sandalwood (astringent)

Sarsaparilla

Sweet/Pungent; Cooling

Corn silk
Fennel

Lemon balm
Rose flowers (bitter, astringent)

Saffron (bitter)