Understanding Nutrition: Nuggets from the Upanishads

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The Upanishads are one of the most important texts of Indian philosophy[1]. The Upanishads are "teaching texts", which share learning through questions, riddles and analogies. This timeless wisdom is especially important in today's world, as we grapple with epidemics of metabolic and nutritional disease.

In this study, we explore the vast Upanishads for insights related to nutrition and health. Building upon earlier commentaries[2-4], we hope that this publication will help us understand and appreciate the importance of healthy nutrition.

The Upanishads allude frequently to food and nutrition. Across their chapter and verses, food is mentioned repeatedly as a surrogate form of godliness, as a sacrifice to the creator, and as a means of survival.

Physiology

"Hunger is Death" proclaims the Isha Upanishad (verse 2). This strong statement reflects, perhaps, the occurrence of the life-threatening famines in ancient times. Hunger is explained as a physiological phenomenon, which needs to be pacified.

"The self-afflicted the man with hunger and thirst."

—Aitareya Upanishad II.1.

"Through the desire for food, all this was shaped by Brahman."

—Maitri Upanishad VI.12.

Creation created food, and the eater of food, it goes on to explain (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad I.4:6).

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Spirituality

As a corollary, "Food is divine" appears confidently as a concept in multiple places in the Upanishad.

The deity *"sang into being good food"*, and the gods asked for *"a share in this food."*

—Brihadaranyaka Upanishad I.3:17-18.

"The person is made of the essence of food."

—Taittiriya Upanishad II:1.

"Whatever creatures depend on earth, are born from food.

By food they live, and into it go in the end."

—Taittiriya Upanishad II.2.1.

Food, in fact is given a god-like quality.

"Who are the two gods? Food and breath."

—Brihadaranyaka Upanishad III.9:8.

"Food is Prajapati From it comes seed, and from that all creatures are produced."

—Prashna Upanishad Q I.14.

"Food is Brahman."

—Taittiriya Upanishad III.2:1.

"I am food-_ _. I am the eater of food."

—Taittiriya Upanishad II.10:5.

"I worship him as King Soma, the self of food" said Ajatashatru to Gargya Balaki, when asked about the nature of the supreme power.

—Kaushitaki Upanishad IV.4.

Pragmatism

A reality check related to food is also offered by the Upanishads.

"Some say that food is Brahman, but it is not so, for without breath, food decays. Some say that breath is Brahman, but it is not so, for without food, breath dries up."

—Brihadaranyaka Upanishad V.12:1.

Food is equated with existence and with the beginning and end of life.

In another verse, food is described as Brahman, as being worthy of worship, as a panacea, as the seniormost of all beings, and as a desirable trophy.

"Food is the eldest of beings, so it is called "the panacea (Sarva aushadhi)", those who worship food as Brahman, win all food."

—Taittiriya Upanishad II.2:1.

Therapeutics

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad classifies foods into seven types, based on their suitability for the creator, the gods, humans and animal (I.5:1). This is probably the oldest classification of food stuffs in literature.

Medical nutrition therapy is suggested, perhaps as an epigenetic intervention, for both partners desirous of begetting offspring with specific features. Different foods are suggested, both for husband and wife, based upon the type of offspring they want.

—Brihadaranyaka Upanishad VI.4:14-18.

Practicality

Varuna, in the Taittiriya Upanishad, offers pragmatic advice to his son Bhrigu Varuna.

"One should not speak ill of food: that should be the view."

"One should not reject food: that should be the view."

"One should make much of food: that should be the view."

Varuna explains that food, breath and body coexist together, as do the waters and light, or earth and space.

"The one who know food as standing firm on food stands firm: he becomes a possessor of food, an ester of food; becomes great in offspring and animal and the radiance of Brahman, great in fame."

—Taittiriya Upanishads III 7, III 8, III 9.

Similar advice is shared by Maitreya.

"Food is the highest form of the self, for breath is made of food. If one does not eat, one becomes unable to think, unable to hear, unable to touch, unable to see, unable to speak, unable to smell, unable to taste, and one gives up one's breaths."

—Maitri Upanishad VI.11.

Mindful Eating

Mindful eating, considered by some as a modern "discovery", finds mention in the Upanishads.

"Without awareness, the tongue cannot make one aware of any taste of food. One says, "My mind was elsewhere: I was not aware of this taste of food."

—Kaushitaki Upanishad III:7.

Summary

"Food keeps away old age. Food, it is said, makes folk well disposed; Food is the breath of animal; Food is the eldest; food, it is said, is medicine."

—Maitri Upanishad VI.13.

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