Chapter One

Food

The Yogic Attitude towards Food

If you want to do Yoga, you must take more and more in all matters, small or great, the Yogic attitude. In our path that attitude is not one of forceful suppression, but of detachment and equality with regard to the objects of desire. Forceful suppression (fasting comes under the head) stands on the same level as free indulgence; in both cases, the desire remains; in the one it is fed by indulgence, in the other it lies latent and exasperated by suppression. It is only when one stands back, separates oneself from the lower vital, refusing to regard its desires and clamours as one’s own, and cultivates an entire equality and equanimity in the consciousness with respect to them that the lower vital itself becomes gradually purified and itself also calm and equal. Each wave of desire as it comes must be observed, as quietly and with as much unmoved detachment as you would observe something going on outside you, and must be allowed to pass, rejected from the consciousness, and the true movement, the true consciousness steadily put in its place.

*  

About food, tea etc. the aim of Yoga is to have no hankerings, no slavery either to the stomach or the palate. How to get to that point is another matter — it depends often on the individual. With a thing like tea, the strongest and easiest way is to stop it. As to food the best way usually is to take the food given you, practise non-attachment and follow no fancies. That would mean giving up the Sunday indulgence. The rest must be done by an inner change of consciousness and not by external means.

*  

It is a mistake to neglect the body and let it waste away; the body
is the means of the sadhana and should be maintained in good order. There should be no attachment to it, but no contempt or neglect either of the material part of our nature.

In this Yoga the aim is not only the union with the higher consciousness but the transformation (by its power) of the lower including the physical nature.

It is not necessary to have desire or greed of food in order to eat. The Yogi eats not out of desire, but to maintain the body.

* That [disgust for eating] is rather an excessive feeling. One should eat for maintenance of the body without attaching any other importance, but without repulsion.

* The vital of most people is of this kind [too weak to restrain its desires for pleasure], except in a few who are indifferent to sex or to food desire or to both, by temperament and nature. There is always something in the lower vital which is recalcitrant and takes a pleasure in following its own way and disregarding the higher dictate, and there are always external forces hostile to the Yoga which try to take advantage of its obscurities, revolts and weaknesses. Neither neglect this turn of the nature (food desire) nor make too much of it; it has to be dealt with, purified and mastered but without giving it too much importance. There are two ways of conquering it—one of detachment, learning to regard food as only a physical necessity and the vital satisfaction of the stomach and the palate as a thing of little or no importance; the other is to be able to take without insistence or seeking any food given and to find in it (whether pronounced good or bad by others) the equal rasa, not of the food for its own sake, but of the universal Ananda. But the latter comes usually only when one can live in the cosmic consciousness or rise into the Overmind—and for this you are not yet ready. So the first way is the one you should keep in view.
Do not trouble your mind about food. Take it in the right quantity (neither too much nor too little), without greed or repulsion, as the means given you by the Mother for the maintenance of the body, in the right spirit, offering it to the Divine in you; then it need not create *tamas*.

*  

It is much better to eat the meal in silence or at any rate in quietness.

**Attachment to Food**

It is the attachment to food, the greed and eagerness for it, making it an unduly important thing in the life, that is contrary to the spirit of Yoga. To be aware that something is pleasant to the palate is not wrong; only one must have no desire nor hankering for it, no exultation in getting it, no displeasure or regret at not getting it. One must be calm and equal, not getting upset or dissatisfied when the food is not tasty or not in abundance — eating the fixed amount that is necessary, not less or more. There should be neither eagerness nor repugnance.

To be always thinking about food and troubling the mind is quite the wrong way of getting rid of the food-desire. Put the food element in the right place in the life, in a small corner, and don’t concentrate on it but on other things.

*  

The attachment to good food must be given up as also the personal attachment to position and service; but it is not indispensably necessary for that purpose to take to an ascetic diet or to give up all means of action such as money and service. The Yogin has to become *niḥsva* in this sense that he feels that nothing belongs to him but all to the Divine and he must be ready at any time to give up all to the Divine. But there is no meaning in throwing away everything in order to be externally *niḥsva* without any imperative cause.
The first thing to be attained about eating, is to get rid of the greed of food, the attachment and desire, — to take it only as a need of the body, to think little of it and not to allow it to occupy a big place in the life; also to be satisfied with what you get, not to hanker. At the same time sufficient food should be taken, avoiding either deficiency or excess; an excessive coercion or nigraha in this respect (as opposed to reasonable control) often brings a reaction. One should go steadily, but not try to get too much done at once.

As for Sannyasis and food, Sannyasis put a compulsion on their desires in this and other matters — they take ascetic food as a principle; but this does not necessarily kill the greed for food, it remains compressed and, if the compulsion or principle is removed, it can come up again stronger than before — for compression without removal often increases the force of these things instead of destroying them.

Not to eat as the method of getting rid of the greed of food is the ascetic way. Ours is equanimity and non-attachment.

These things [persistent desires] still rise in you because they have been for so long prominent difficulties and, as far as the first is concerned, because you gave it much justification from the mind at one time. But if the inner consciousness is growing like that they are sure to go. Only if they rise, don't give them harbourage. Perhaps with regard to the greed for food, your attitude has not been quite correct. Greed for food has to be overcome, but it has not to be given too much thought. The proper attitude to food is a certain equality. Food is for the maintenance of the body and one should take enough for that — what the body needs; if one gives less the body feels the need
and hankers; if you give more, then that is indulging the vital. As for particular foods the palate likes, the attitude of the mind and vital should be, “If I get, I take; if I don’t get, I shall not mind.” One should not think too much of food either to indulge or unduly to repress — that is the best.

*

One does not need to get a hatred for food in order to get rid of the greed for food. On the other hand, to develop dislike for certain things may help to reject them — but that too is not always the cure, for they may remain in spite of the dislike.

*

It is true that the greed of food, the desire of the palate are very strong in a great many if not most of the sadhaks; this is one of the things that they take as natural and seem not at all anxious to get it out of them. I do not think it is active in you; what you felt must have come in from the others, — for very often one feels the things that are in the atmosphere and one must be careful to distinguish that from one’s own feeling.

*

As to taking tea or food there [at a friend’s place], you must always remember that to be governed by these desires is not at all an ideal condition. But if you have the impulse and are not able easily and naturally to reject it, you can take on condition you scrupulously inform the Mother both of the act and of the movement and state of mind accompanying it. Also often the desire may not be yours, but may come on you from outside, imposed on you silently or otherwise by suggestion by the others; you must learn to see when it is like that and then you must reject it. Your aspiration must be for an inner change so that there will be no longer any need to indulge the desires, because they will no longer have a hold on you.

You must learn to watch yourself and know what is the true nature and source of the movements in you and report them
carefully—as in fact you had begun to do when you first had the psychic opening and could see the movements in you or many of them at least very clearly.

*  

Of course—the vital is insatiable.1 There are only two things that interfere with it [greed for food]—the limitations of the body and the disapprobation of the mind—but the latter is not always there. There is also of course the possibility of the psychic interfering, but to that the vital becomes pervious only at a certain stage. It is therefore the body that is the only check for most people.

*  

These complaints about food are of long standing with many—they come from the animal man and will go on so long as the sadhaks identify themselves with the physical animal in them.

Taste

As regards the progress you have made, I do not think you have given us an exaggerated impression of it; it seems to be quite real. It is no part of this Yoga to suppress taste, rasa altogether; so, if you found the ice-cream pleasant, that does not by itself invalidate the completeness of your progress. What is to be got rid of is vital desire and attachment, the greed of food, being overjoyed at getting the food you like, sorry and discontented when you do not have it, giving an undue importance to it, etc. If one wants to be a Yogan, it will not do to be like the ordinary man to whom food, sex and gain are nine-tenths of life or even to keep in any of these things the reactions to which vital human nature is prone. Equality is here the test as in so many other matters. If you can take the Ashram food with satisfaction or at least without dissatisfaction, that is already a sign that attachment

1 The correspondent wrote that the vital being never seems to tire of the enjoyment of food, even though it results in illness, pain and misery for the body. — Ed.
and predilection are losing their old place in the nature.

*Taste is no more a guilty thing than sight or hearing. It is the desire that it awakens that has to be thrown away.

It is possible to get rid of taste like Chaitanya, for it is something that depends on the consciousness and so inhibition is possible. In hypnotic experiments it is found that suggestion can make sugar taste bitter or bitter things sweet. Berkeley and physiology are both right. There is a certain usually fixed relation between the consciousness in the palate and the guṇa of the food, but the consciousness can alter the relation if it wants or inhibit it altogether. There are Yogis who make themselves insensitive to pain also and that too can be done by hypnosis.

Another method is to find all things good to the taste without attachment to any.

*No — it [taste] is not a bondage, if there is no attachment. Taste is natural and quite permissible so long as one is not the slave of the palate. Certainly, the enjoyment of taste can be offered up. I don’t know that there is any fruit of eating in the sense of the phrase in the Gita.

**Sensitivity to Smell**

This [reaction of uneasiness after smelling food] is due to an acute consciousness and sensitiveness of the physical being, especially the vital physical. The sense of being fed by smell has become thereby very acute—the feeding by smell is a well known thing, and there is the Sanskrit proverb, ghrāṇam ārdhābhōjanam, “smell is a half eating”. But this by itself would not produce the uneasiness, which must be due to an acute physical sensitiveness to the mass of ordinary human reactions concentrated about the food, greed etc. which fill the atmosphere. It does not look as if more than a very few of the sadhaks were free (even they mainly, not wholly) from these
reactions; most seem to accept them as quite normal and proper in a life of Yoga!!

It is good for the physical to be more and more conscious, but it should not be overpowered by the things of which it becomes aware or badly affected or upset by them. A strong equality and mastery and detachment must come in the nerves and body as in the mind, which will enable the physical to know and contact these things without feeling any disturbance; it should know and be conscious and reject and throw away the pressure of the movements in the atmosphere, not merely feel them and suffer.

Hunger

I suppose you have become aware of the principle of hunger in the vital physical. It is not really either by satisfying it or forcibly denying it that it will go — it is by putting a will on it to change and bringing down a higher consciousness that it can change.

* 

To suppress hunger like that is not good, it very often creates disorders. I doubt whether fatness or thinness of a healthy kind depends on the amount of food taken — there are people who eat well and remain thin and others who take only one meal a day and remain fat. By underfeeding (taking less than the body really needs) one may get emaciated, but that is not a healthy state. The doctors say it depends mostly on the working of certain glands. Anyhow the important thing is now to get the nervous strength back.

As for the liver also eating little does not help, very often it makes the liver sluggish so that it works less well. What is recommended for liver trouble is to avoid greasy food and much eating of sweets and that is also one way of avoiding fat. But to eat too little is not good — it may be necessary in some stomach or intestinal illness, but not for the ordinary liver trouble.

*
This feeling of not being able to eat and of eating being unnecessary is a sort of suggestion that is coming to several people. It should be rejected and cleared out of the system as it may lead to weakening of the body by taking insufficient food. Often one does not feel weak at first, a vital energy comes which supports the body, but later on the body weakens. This feeling may sometimes come when one is going much inside and there is no insistence on the bodily needs; but it should not be accepted. If it is rejected, it is likely to disappear.

*When I spoke about the inability to eat being a suggestion, I meant a suggestion to the body consciousness itself, not to your mind. When such suggestions come, they produce physical effects of this kind, instead of the idea of not eating there comes a sort of inability to eat.*

*The absence of hunger and thirst and the eating only for maintenance of the body without any feeling of having eaten is a state that sometimes comes when one is living more and more in the inner being and less in the body.*

**Quantity of Food**

What is necessary is to take enough food and think no more about it, taking it as a means for the maintenance of the physical instrument only. But just as one should not overeat, so one should not diminish unduly — it produces a reaction which defeats the object — for the object is not to allow either the greed for food or the heavy tamas of the physical which is the result of excessive eating to interfere with the concentration on the spiritual experience and progress. If the body is left insufficiently nourished, it will think of food more than otherwise.

*Too much eating makes the body material and heavy, eating
too little makes it weak and nervous — one has to find the true harmony and balance between the body’s need and the food taken.

* 

It depends on what you can digest. If you can digest, there is no harm in taking more since you feel hungry. All these things depend upon what is the true need of the body and that may differ in different cases according to the constitution of the body, the amount of work done or exercise taken. It is possible that you have reduced your food too much — so you can try taking more.

* 

But it is quite natural. Exercise is always supposed to increase the appetite as the body needs more food to restore the extra expense of energy put out. Normally the more physical work the body has to do the more food it needs. On the other hand mental work requires no increase of food — that has been ascertained scientifically by experiment. Hunger may increase by other causes, but when it coincides with the taking up of play or physical exercise of a strenuous character, that is sufficient to explain it.

* 

If the [stomach] pains are strong, you can abstain from work for a day or two till they have subsided. Of course if you feel that you suffer from anything else but liquid food, that settles the question — you can take liquid food only and if you take liquid food only then you will not be strong enough to work. But usually the thought takes a big part in determining these things — the mind has the impression that any solid food will hurt and the body follows — so naturally as a result any solid food does begin to hurt.

* 

The mental or vital vigour does not or need not depend on the
Food

food—it is the physical that after a time begins to get strained if there is not sufficient nourishment.

*

One can bring down the strength \[\textit{from above}\], but it is also necessary to see that the body has sufficient food, sleep and rest — absence of these things strains the nerves and if the nerves are strained the body feels fatigue, becomes weakened.

*

It is possible there was a suppression or underfeeding — you were several times even proposing to eat still less and the Mother did not approve. When there is this suppression I have always noticed that there comes for a time a strong eagerness or necessity for eating largely as if the body were taking its compensation for the past want.

*

If these \[\textit{practices of self-control}\] are done as moral virtues, they need not bring a spiritual state. It is only when they are observed as a spiritual discipline that they help — most of them, at least. A man may eat little and have no spirituality — but if he practises it as a means of self-mastery to get rid of the greed of food, then it helps.

*

It is better to be careful in these matters of food etc., as in the stage through which your sadhana is passing there is a considerable sensitiveness in the vital physical part of the being and it may be easily disturbed by a wrong impact or a wrong movement like overfeeding.

*

When the physical consciousness has been sensitivised, too rich or heavy food becomes offensive to it.

*
It is true that as one reaches an advanced age a diminished diet may become desirable.

**Fasting**

I have myself fasted first for 10 days and then 23 days just to see what it was like and how far one could live without food, and certain things like that. I found that it was no good. To take with equanimity whatever comes (or does not come) seemed to me more the thing than any violent exercises like that.

* 

I think it is not safe to admit any suggestion of not eating — sometimes it opens the door for the non-eating force to take hold of the mind and there is trouble. That comes easily because the inner being of course does not need any food and this non-need is attempted to be thrown by some forces on the body also which is not under the same happy law. It is better to allow the condition [*of peaceful concentration*] to grow in intensity until it can last even through the meal and after. I suppose it is not really the meal that disturbs but the coming out into the outer consciousness which is a little difficult to avoid when one goes to eat; but that can be overcome in time.

* 

You must not let that movement [*of reducing food*] go too far. It is one of the dangers of the sadhana, because of the ascetic turn of Yoga in the past that as experiences come the suggestion comes that food or sleep etc. are not necessary and also there may come an inclination in the body not to eat or not to sleep. But if that is accepted the results are often disastrous. It is no more to be accepted than the inertia itself.

* 

To make your sadhana depend upon not eating is to make a great mistake. When people fast like that, they get into an abnormal condition and can easily mistake imaginations and delusions for
true experiences. Much fasting in the end weakens the nervous system. So you must drop this habit of not eating for days together. For Yoga it is a mistake to eat too much but a mistake also to eat nothing or too little. If you eat too much, you become heavy and tamasic; if you fast or eat too little, you excite the vital energies and finally overexcite them, but at the same time you weaken the body and the nerves; both are bad for sadhana. You should eat regularly a moderate but sufficient amount of food; it is only if there is illness or disturbance of digestion that a low diet or not eating sometimes becomes necessary, but fasting even for the purpose of resting the stomach should not last more than a day.

For your sadhana you have to use, not outward means like this, but quietness, sincere peaceful aspiration, openness to the Mother.

* It is a fact that by fasting, if the mind and the nerves are solid or the will force dynamic, one can get for a time into a state of inner energy and receptivity which is alluring to the mind and the usual reactions of hunger, weakness, intestinal disturbance, etc. can be wholly avoided. But the body suffers by diminution and there can easily develop in the vital a morbid overstrained condition due to the inrush of more vital energy than the nervous system can assimilate or coordinate. Nervous people should avoid the temptation to fast; it is often accompanied or followed by delusions and a loss of balance. Especially if there is a motive of hunger-strike or that element comes in, as it did in your case, fasting becomes perilous, for it is then an indulgence of a vital movement which may easily become a habit injurious and pernicious to the sadhana. Even if all these reactions are avoided, still there is no sufficient utility in fasting, since the higher energy and receptivity ought to come not by artificial or physical means but by intensity of the consciousness and strong will for the sadhana.

*
I never heard of it [fasting to get realisation]; but it is just the way to get the wrong realisation. The nerves get into an excited tense condition (when they do not collapse) and invent realisations or open to a wrong Force. At least that often happens.

The idea of giving up food is a wrong inspiration. You can go on with a small quantity of food, but not without food altogether, except for a comparatively short time. Remember what the Gita says, “Yoga is not for one who eats in excess nor for one who abstains from eating altogether.” Vital energy is one thing — of that one can draw a great amount without food and often it increases with fasting; but physical substance, without which life loses its support, is of a different order. If at any time it became possible to renew the body without food and that proved necessary for the Yoga, the Mother and I would be the first to do it. So keep to your established diet and do not get impatient with Nature.

The transformation to which we aspire is too vast and complex to come at one stroke; it must be allowed to come by stages. The physical change is the last of these stages and is itself a progressive process.

The inner transformation cannot be brought about by physical means either of a positive or a negative nature. On the contrary, the physical change itself can only be brought about by a descent of the greater supramental consciousness into the cells of the body. Till then at least the body and its supporting energies have to be maintained in part by the ordinary means, food, sleep, etc. Food has to be taken in the right spirit, with the right consciousness; sleep has to be gradually transformed into the Yogic repose. A premature and excessive physical austerity (tapasyā) may endanger the process of the sadhana by establishing a disturbance and abnormality of the forces in the different parts of the system. A great energy may pour into the mental and vital parts, but the nerves and the body may be overstrained and
lose the strength to support the play of these higher energies. This is the reason why an extreme physical austerity is not included here as a substantive part of the sadhana.

There is no harm in fasting from time to time for a day or two or in reducing the food taken to a small but sufficient modicum; but entire abstinence for a long period is not advisable.

Types of Food

I think the importance of sattvic food from the spiritual point of view has been exaggerated. Food is rather a question of hygiene and many of the sanctions and prohibitions laid down in ancient religions had more a hygienic than a spiritual motive. The Gita’s definitions seem to point in the same direction — tamasic food, it seems to say, is what is stale or rotten with the virtue gone out of it, rajasic food is that which is too acrid, pungent etc., heats the blood and spoils the health, sattvic food is what is pleasing, healthy etc. It may well be that different kinds of food nourish the action of the different gunas and so indirectly are helpful or harmful apart from their physical action. But that is as far as we can confidently go. What particular eatables are or are not sattvic is another question and more difficult to determine. Spiritually, I should say that the effect of food depends more on the occult atmosphere and influences that come with it than on anything in the food itself. Vegetarianism is another question altogether; it stands, as you say, on a will not to do harm to the more conscious forms of life for the satisfaction of the belly.

As to the question of practising to take all kinds of food with equal rasa, it is not necessary to practise nor does it really come by practice. One has to acquire equality within in the consciousness and as this equality grows one can extend it or apply it to the various fields of the activity of the consciousness.

*  

Those who are ready to give up animal food, should certainly
do so. The others can do it when they are ready.²

*  

It is rather certain kinds of food that are supposed to increase it [sexual desire] — e.g. meat, onions, chillis etc.

*  

It [the chilli] is an aphrodisiac — has a strong effect on the sex centre.

*  

If it [taking chillis] is once only in some months it can’t be harmful for the body. For the sadhana what is harmful is taking to satisfy desire, fancy, impulse — it is not the thing in itself.

*  

There is no sin at all in eating these things [onions, potatoes, etc.]. The only objection to eating much onions is that it is supposed to stimulate not tamoguna but rajas, but there are other foods not forbidden that do that.

*  

I think onions can be described as rajaso-tamasic in their charac-ter. They are heavy and material and at the same time excitant of certain strong material-vital forces. It is obvious that if one wants to conquer the physical passions and is still very much subject to the body nature and the things that affect it, free indulgence in onions is not advisable. It is only for those who have risen above the body consciousness and mastered it and are not affected by these things that it does not at all matter; for them the use of this or that food or its disuse makes no difference. At the same time I must say that the abstinence from rajasic or tamasic foods does not of itself assure freedom from the things they help to stimulate. Vegetarians, for instance, can be as sensual and excitable as meat-eaters; a man may abstain

² This letter was written to someone living outside the Ashram. — Ed.
from onions and yet be in these respects no better than before. It is a change of consciousness that is effective and this kind of abstention helps that only in so far as it tends to create a less heavy and more refined and plastic physical consciousness for the higher will to act upon. That is something, but it is not all; the change of consciousness can come even in spite of non-abstinence.

Onions are allowed here because the palate of the sadhaks demands something to give a taste to the food. We do not insist on these details, or make an absolutely strict rule, as the stress here is more on the inward change, the outward coming as its result. Only so much is insisted on as is essential for organization and inner and outer discipline and to point the way to an indispensable self-control. It is pressed on all that the greed of the palate has to be conquered, but it has to be done in the last resort from within, as also the other passions and desires of the lower nature.

*

Betel is anaesthetic, depressive and yet with a certain toxic effect — that is why it is prohibited.

Whatever is done without purpose is a useless and wrong movement.

Eating things from outside is not safe either from the physical or from the spiritual point of view.

**Intoxicants**

It is the habit in the subconscient material that feels an artificial need created by the past and does not care whether it is harmful or disturbing to the nerves or not. That is the nature of all intoxications (wine, tobacco, cocaine etc.), people go on even after the deleterious effects have shown themselves and even after all real pleasure in it has ceased because of this artificial need (it is not real). The will has to get hold of this subconscient persistence and dissolve it.

*
Smoking is only a morbid craving of physical desire — there is no other reason for people doing it. Smoking is tamasic and prevents control of mind.

*  

These intoxicants [*such as bhang*] put one in relation with a vital world in which such things [*as music and song*] exist.