

Meditation and Diet

It is sometimes claimed that in order to practice meditation one must adopt a particular diet: eat only light healthy foods, be vegetarian or follow macrobiotics (brown rice diet). But there are no doubt many people who would like to experience the taste of meditation but are not ready to give up the taste of the foods they are used to.

Good diet is in fact just one of a broad class of conditions or factors that facilitate the meditation process. These factors include an unhurried and simple lifestyle, contact with a teacher who can guide your progress, networking with fellow meditators, living in a peaceful environment, not abusing drugs (including legal drugs like tobacco and alcohol), living in a culture or community that encourages meditative values, exercise, and in general, being in good health and being without stresses in your life.

Concerning such facilitating factors, I'd like to emphasize two points. The first is to encourage you to establish them in your life to the extent that this is possible and matches your value system. The second is to remember that success with meditation is in no way dependent on any of these factors. The person who says that they will start meditating when they find the right teacher or feel better or get a little more free time will probably never start.

In meditation, the "name of the game" is to be independent of conditions and circumstances. This refers both to the ultimate goal of meditation (unconditional freedom) and to an attitude toward practice that should be established early on. When you are in circumstances that nurture your practice, go for it! It's fun to run unimpeded on broad flat ground. However, when you encounter circumstances that militate against your practice, such as poor health, emotional upset or chaotic surroundings, keep going! You learn something by running up hills, too.

In order to disabuse people of the preconception that meditation is dependent on a certain lifestyle, some teachers and traditions go to the other extreme. During the first two years of my practice I lived at Mount Koya which is the main training site for the Shingon school of Japanese Vajrayana Buddhism. There I followed a strict traditional diet: no meat, alcohol, onions, etc. In fact I got quite attached to my "state of purity." Then I decided to participate in a three month training period at Shokokuji, an ancient Zen monastery in Kyoto, the old imperial capital of Japan. Before the training period started, the senior monks threw a party for us newbies. We were all forced to consume huge quantities of beer, sake and pork cutlets. So much for my "perfect record!"

Concerning Zen diet, I can't resist telling one more story. I once heard a group of Americans invite a Japanese Zen monk out for dinner. "What do you like?" they asked. "I not like mac-ro-biotic. I like mac-do-nald," was his reply.