



AHARA or DIET or FOOD

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AHARA or DIET or FOOD

There is no medicine or medicament equal to a proper diet. One is capable of making a person disease-free just by the use of a diet suited to the individual. Since life cannot be sustained without diet and only on medicine, the proper diet is referred to as the "great(est) medicine". (KhilaSthanam 4/5-6)

The importance of food in the maintenance of health is all too well known. What is not known, however, is the importance of creating and maintaining a diet that is suited to a particular individual based on the need of his body and mind instead of a generalized diet based primarily on the disease conditions. Ayurveda deals with food extensively. Here we will only be highlighting some of the more salient points which can be immediately put into practice so that one can make a beginning.

FOOD FACTS

We must remember that there are many factors that determine whether the intake of food is healthy or not. Some of the important ones are:

- the type and quantity of food,
- mode of processing,
- types of food that are processed together,
- types of food that are eaten together in the same meal,
- when the food is eaten,
- how the food is eaten,
- where the food is eaten, &
- what is done after the meal is over etc.

All this plays a very important role in making the food taken, healthy or unhealthy. Ayurveda dwells on all these points and also on how they should be considered in formulating your diet.

FOOD FACTORS

A self controlled person should take food only after considering the seven factors related to foods, which are -

- svabhava (natural qualities),
- samyoga (admixture),
- samskara (processing),
- matra (quantity),
- desa (habitat),
- kala (time) and
- upayoga vyavastha (mode of using)

This is the cause of food causing health or ill health. The above are very significant factors which have to be taken into account while formulating one's diet. Due consideration given to each of these factors will enable better digestion and better health.

* **SVABHAVA** is the natural quality of the food. For example, rain water, red variety of rice, green gram and the meat of deer are easily digestible; whereas milk, sugarcane juice, black gram and meat of animals living in marshy region are not so easily digestible. This is svabhava. However one must remember that these natural qualities will undergo change by the effect of mixing with other substances and also the other factors mentioned above.

* **SAMYOGA** or admixture is the mixing of two or more substances together. This union produces special qualities not possessed by the individual substances of the combination.

* **SAMSKARA** or processing is the result of contact with water or fire, washing, churning, place, time, mode and vessel used for cooking. Thus preparatory processes like putting rice in water for soaking, grinding rice with dal, roasting, frying, heating, burning, boiling in water, frying in fats, cooking in steam, baking etc. also affect the quality of the food.

* **MATRA** is applicable to the total quantity of food to be consumed and also to each item separately. Certain articles of food should compulsorily be consumed in less quantity - these are mostly items which are harder to digest.

DESA refers to both the region in which the article of food is grown and also to the region where the user lives. Desa also refers to the body of the user which means giving consideration to the state of his health, strength, constitution and digestive capacity.

KALA refers to the time of the year, time of the day, age of the user and the stage of the disease (if exists) and also to the intake of food in relation to proper/improper digestion of the previously partaken meal.

UPAYOGA VYAVASTHA refers to the manner of taking food.

* Food should not be taken . . .

- without taking bath,
- without putting on any clothes,
- without offering oblations to fire,
- without repeating some prayers,
- without giving food first to the fire, preceptors, invited and uninvited guests, and to others who are dependent on the individual.

* You should take food

- with your own hand,
- at a suitable place and time,
- after cleaning one's face and mouth well.

* You should be served the food with love, and the food should not be contaminated with hair, flies etc.

* You should never abuse the food you take.

* You should abstain from taking food

- used by others;
- which has been made hot for the second time;
- which is not very hot nor overcooked.

* The food should be prepared well.

* The food should not be taken

- very late in the evening or very early in the morning,
- in a very open place,
- in sunlight,
- in darkness,
- under a tree,
- lying in bed,

- in a vessel which is broken,
- not covered,
- not clean;
- and by holding the container or the food in the hand.

* Stale food should not be taken except meat, upadamsa (pickles) and bhakshya (eatables which require good mastication). Food which is preserved from the previous day should not be taken except curds, honey, ghee, liquid foods containing flour, and pudding prepared from milk.

* Food should contain fats (oil, ghee etc.), be easily digestible and warm.

THE IDEAL FOOD ROUTINE

It should not be eaten very slowly or very fast or accompanied with too much of talk and laughter. The person should eat food with relish and with a good knowledge of one's own self. One should normally take food that one is used to and "that which becomes one with the body from the habit of using for a long time and so gives comfort to the body".

Considering the digestive capacity and habituation, foods which are either watery or very dry, hard to digest, sweet and fatty should be consumed in the beginning; those which are sour and salty in the middle and those which are dry, liquid and of other tastes at the end. Those who have poor digestive capacity should consume liquid and warm foods in the beginning itself, for the digestive activity getting stimulated by the heat, digest the other foods which are eaten later, in a proper way.

IDEAL AFTER-DRINKS

After taking food, WATER is the best drink because it is the chief source of all the tastes; it is accustomed to all living beings, and possesses the properties of sustaining life etc. It should be taken cold, after consuming curds, honey, barley, wheat and all other foods, which cause burning sensation during digestion and in autumn and summer seasons. It should be taken hot after consuming foods prepared from corn flour and such other items which are hard to digest, and also during winter.

MILK as an after-drink is best after eating rice; for those who are debilitated with fasting, long walk, speaking, sexual intercourse and exercise, and also for children and the aged.

SOUR LIQUIDS is the best drink after food for those having disorders of vata; SUGARY LIQUIDS for disorder of pitta; and water boiled with Triphala and mixed with honey for disease of kapha and of the eyes and throat. In brief, that liquid which possesses the properties opposite of that of the food, and that which does not cause any harm to the person is the ideal after drink.

The after drink tones up the body, gives satisfaction, invigorates, causes plumpness, gives a feeling of contentment, makes the food move downwards easily, breaks the hard material of the food, makes them soft, moistens them, helps for easy digestion and distribution to all parts of the body.

The after drink is to be avoided by those who are suffering from diseases of the parts of the body above the shoulders, dyspnoea, cough, excess salivation, hiccups, hoarseness of voice, injury to the chest and those who are indulging in too much of singing and speaking. For such persons, the after drink disturbs the stomach and chest, increases the moisture of the food in the throat and causes watery discharges from the tissues, indigestion, vomiting and other diseases.

After taking the after drink, the person should not indulge in speaking, singing, walking long distance and sleeping.

AFTER-FOOD ROUTINE

After taking the meals, the person should clean his hands well, to remove the remnants of food, clean the teeth to remove the residue of food, if any sticking on there, gargle the mouth to remove the coating, smell and greasiness; touch the eyes with the moist finger tips, make the mouth pleasant by chewing betel leaves, inhale smoke to remove upward accumulation of kapha, walk about one hundred steps, and recline comfortably on his left side. Traveling, swimming, basking in the sun etc. should be avoided immediately after taking food.

FOOD EFFECTS

Very dry foods cause loss of strength and colour or complexion, dryness of the skin and obstruction to the movement of flatus and faeces; fatty foods cause great increase of kapha, excess salivation, heaviness of the heart, laziness and loss of taste and appetite.

Very hot foods cause toxicity, burning sensation, thirst, loss of strength, giddiness and bleeding diseases; very cold foods cause debility, loss of taste, weak digestive capacity, oppression in the chest (nausea), stasis of food for long time inside.

Very hard foods cause obstruction to urine and faeces, a feeling of not being contented, of not spreading to all parts of the body, and of not undergoing quick digestion; very liquid foods produce running in the nose, diabetes, cough, eye disease and destroy the digestive fire.

Foods which are very sweet diminish the digestive capacity, are not good for health and do not nourish the body; food which is very salty is bad for the eyes; very sour food brings old age quickly.

Thus while deciding one's diet, one should take into consideration several factors like time of the year, time of the day, place of residence, one's age, one's natural body type, one's digestion capacity, one's inherent and acquired strength and the type of food that one is used to. Further, one cannot just identify one's diet and stick to it come what may. There has to be a continuing dynamic interaction with the body at all times and one of the most important factors that need to be considered is the digestion of the previous meal which can be greatly understood by observing one's bowel movements.

This should determine whether any extra care needs to be taken, whether any type of food needs to be added or deleted, whether any particular Rasa or taste needs to be increased or decreased and so on. Initially though one may have to make a conscious effort to get this understanding, over a period of time, it will come naturally and you will develop a tendency to take only such food and drinks with which your body is comfortable.

MODE OF INTAKE OF FOOD

* QUANTITY

The mode of intake of food is very clearly described in the Ayurvedic texts. If one divides one's stomach into 4 parts, we should fill 2 parts with solid food, 1 part with liquid food and leave 1 part empty. This is the ideal quantity of food and drinks that should go into one's body every time one has a meal.

In practical terms, this would mean that while taking food, one should stop at that point when one gets the feeling that a couple of more morsels and one will be really full. For one to know this feeling, one should be aware while eating food, and should not be doing other activities like talking or reading or watching television simultaneously.

Consuming of insufficient quantity of food does not help in building up strength, growth and vigour, and it becomes a cause for all diseases of vata origin. Excess quantity on the other hand produces quick increase of all the doshas. Hence it is very important to eat the right quantity of food which will activate the Agni or digestive fire.

* QUALITY

One should use all the six rasas (tastes) - sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent and astringent - in food every day for the maintenance of good health. Further, one should use the rasas suited to the particular season. All these tastes should be used in good measure by a healthy person.

During cold and rainy seasons, one should especially make use of sweet, sour and salt tastes; during spring, the bitter, pungent and astringent tastes should be used more; sweet taste during summer; and sweet, bitter and astringent tastes during autumn. The food and drink should be dry in autumn and spring, cold during summer and end of rainy season, and hot in the other times of the year.

It may be noted that it is not said that only particular tastes should be used in a particular season. All that is said that a little more of specific

tastes should be used according to the season as that particular taste is suited to that time of the year and will better help your digestive process.

In the quest for health foods, one should not withdraw suddenly some food that one has become used to because one suddenly realizes that it is not a healthy food. Similarly, the addition of some food in large quantities, just because it has been found to be healthy, is also not good for the body.

The above is particularly relevant in the modern world where increasing awareness about health and health foods is actually creating ill-health. Some people suddenly go off junk food, which they have been consuming in large quantities earlier; other people suddenly begin taking huge quantities of food supplements, because they think it is good for them; both will not have the desired effect unless one gives due consideration to the body's needs before taking or discarding anything.

It is good to get off unhealthy food and drinks - Unhealthy here is that which is not found suitable to you and also that combination of food and drinks which is generally found to be toxic. To explain this, there are certain combinations of food, where though the individual food items may be very healthy, in combination they negate each other's effect and are actually toxic.

For example, honey and ghee, which are both very good individually should not be mixed in equal quantities and taken together. Or germinated grain (or sprouts) should not be taken along with jaggery or milk or curds or yoghurt. Or deer meat or chicken should not be taken with curds or yoghurt. Or after consuming green leafy vegetables, one should not drink milk. These are just a few examples.

However, it has to be remembered that foods though if incompatible, do not produce disease in those who are habituated to exercise or physical activity; unctuous or fatty foods are not a problem for who have good digestive power, who are middle-aged and strong and in those who consume such foods in very little quantity.

* WHEN TO TAKE FOOD

The ideal time for taking meals is after the body is clear after elimination of faeces and urine, when the mind is clean (devoid of emotions), when the doshas are moving in their natural paths (functioning normally), when belching is pure (without any foul smell or taste), when hunger is well manifest, when the flatus is moving downwards easily, when the digestive fire is keen, when the sense organs are clear (functioning well), when the body is light.

* HOW TO TAKE FOOD

Food which is not easily digestible, which are unctuous, sweet etc. should be consumed at the commencement of the meal; foods of opposite qualities should be taken at the end of the meal; and those which are predominantly sour and salt, in the middle of the meal.

The food consumed should be accustomed, clean, suited to health, unctuous, hot and easily digestible; partaken with due attention, should contain all the six tastes with predominance of sweet taste, eaten neither very quickly nor very slowly; after taking bath, after having good hunger, sitting in solitude, after washing the feet, hands and face, after offering prayers, without scolding or abusing the food, without too much of talk; should have more of liquid food, that which is liked, in the company of liked persons, and served by those who are clean and faithful.

FOOD RULES

Vegetables which are infected by insects, affected by wind and the sun, dry, old, non-seasonal, not cooked with fat and not cleaned well should be discarded. Food which is contaminated with hair etc.; warmed again (re-heated); which consists of more vegetables; and which is very hot and very salty should be rejected.

This is a very important point in the modern context for the present trend is to prepare food for a week and keep in cold storage and then heated at the time of every meal. Ayurveda very clearly says that such food is not good for the human system and that every time the food is

re-heated, it loses most of its good properties and becomes more difficult to digest.

Further Ayurveda also says that a meal should not consist of more vegetables. This is again very significant, for, vegetarianism in the western world today is associated with eating a vegetable salad as a full meal. This is wrong on two counts - any meal should not have vegetables as the main course; it should preferably be rice or wheat. Secondly, eating raw or uncooked vegetables is not advocated by Ayurveda. The vegetables should, at the least, be steamed before intake, as this will enable better digestion and absorption. The texts specifically say that eating uncooked food (read as raw food) will lead to digestive disorders and impaired metabolism and the formation of Ama.

Thus, to reiterate, Ayurveda clearly says that uncooked or overcooked food is not good to take. Re-heated food is also not easy to digest.

Some foods which should not be consumed habitually are yoghurt, alkaline food, fermented gruel, uncooked radish, meat of animals which are emaciated, meat of boar, sheep, cow, fish and buffalo, germinated grains, dried vegetables and small barley.

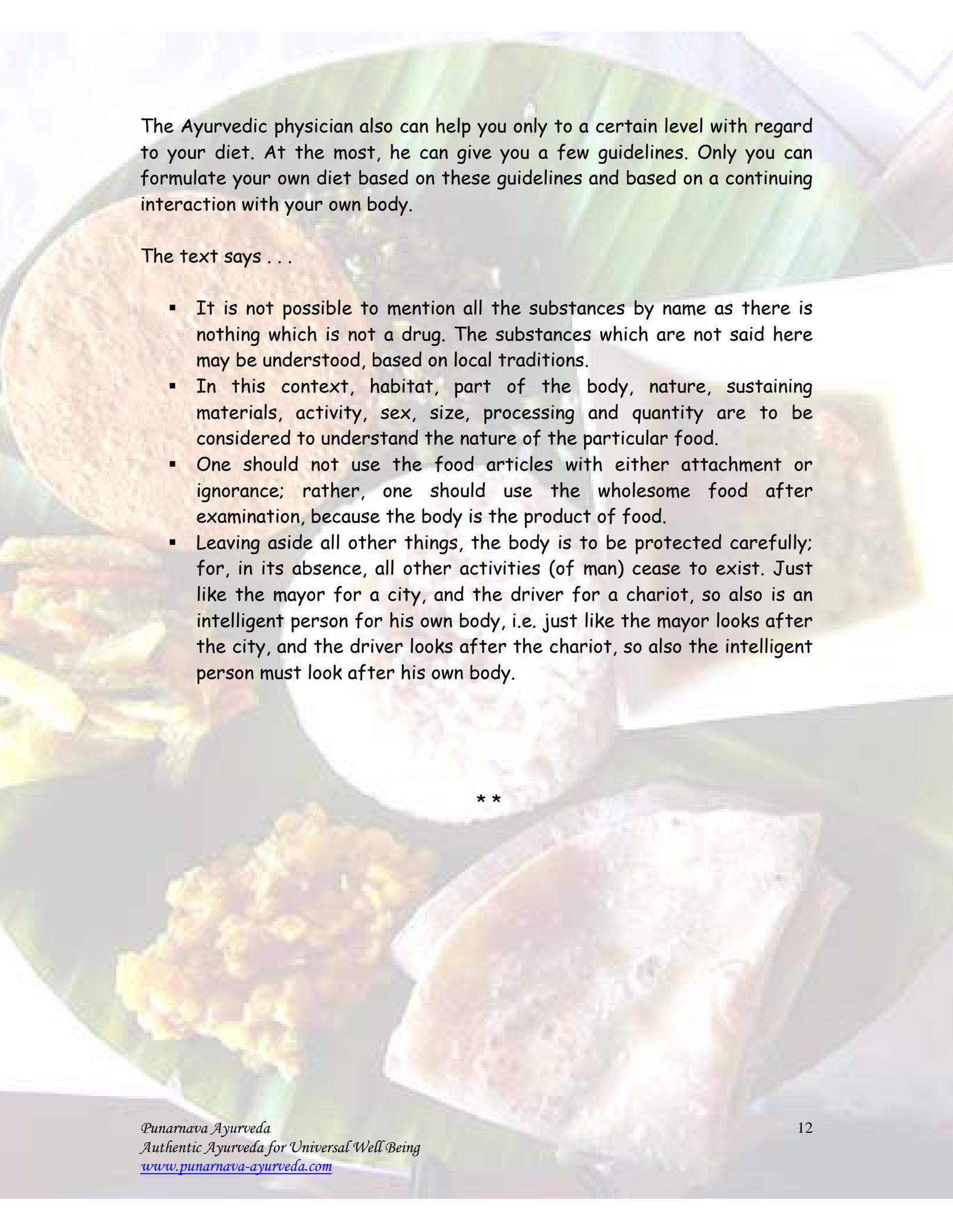
Some food which can be consumed regularly are rice, wheat, barley, gooseberry, grapes, sugar, ghee, pure water, milk, honey, pomegranates and salt.

* WHAT NOT TO DO AFTER EATING FOOD

The texts say that all persons, whether healthy or sick, should avoid speaking, walking long distances and sleeping immediately after consuming liquids; exposure to sun and fire, travel in vehicles, swimming and riding on animals soon after consuming food.

CONCLUSION

The above are some salient points which need to be considered while formulating one's diet. As mentioned earlier, Ayurveda does not prescribe a generalized diet for everyone.



The Ayurvedic physician also can help you only to a certain level with regard to your diet. At the most, he can give you a few guidelines. Only you can formulate your own diet based on these guidelines and based on a continuing interaction with your own body.

The text says . . .

- It is not possible to mention all the substances by name as there is nothing which is not a drug. The substances which are not said here may be understood, based on local traditions.
- In this context, habitat, part of the body, nature, sustaining materials, activity, sex, size, processing and quantity are to be considered to understand the nature of the particular food.
- One should not use the food articles with either attachment or ignorance; rather, one should use the wholesome food after examination, because the body is the product of food.
- Leaving aside all other things, the body is to be protected carefully; for, in its absence, all other activities (of man) cease to exist. Just like the mayor for a city, and the driver for a chariot, so also is an intelligent person for his own body, i.e. just like the mayor looks after the city, and the driver looks after the chariot, so also the intelligent person must look after his own body.

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