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# The Art of Vaisnava Vegetarian Cooking: The Manifestation of Cultural Identity Through the Culinary Craft

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THE ART OF VAISNAVA VEGETARIAN COOKING

The Manifestation of Cultural Identity Through the Culinary Craft

Selena Greising

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Spring 2014

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*Abstract*

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Food and religion are both defining characteristics of a culture, serving as a unique language of communication. The Vaisnava Hindu tradition holds very specific guidelines for food in relation to the religious lifestyle. The inclusions and exclusions, cooking techniques, history, and the manifestation of anciently rooted traditions in the modern world reveal a great deal about the people within the culture. Vaisnavas do not consume meat, fish, garlic, onion, carrot or mushroom, but still maintain the Indian tradition of food bursting with flavor. Beyond the strict culinary aspects of the culture, the religious beliefs exhibit a strong influence upon the food consumed by those in the Vaisnava life. Through study of scriptures, food anthropological studies, stories of devotees, and cooking experience, a part of the rich world of Vaisnava cuisine with its culinary sophistication and devout devotion was exposed. Although it is only a small representation of the relationship between food and religion, it offers an important insight into an integral portion of Indian culture.

## *Acknowledgements*

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## Dedication

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**Warning:** I get to be silly and mushy in this part. Consider this your warning.

I have countless people to thank for my arrival at this point, and for turning my ISP experience into a much more life-changing event than anticipated. However, I will restrict it to a more general overview in interest of space and consideration.

**Babaji**, for bringing so much joy to learning and making me the official “jalebi girl.” Your lessons and “Big Chief, No Shit” have left a lasting smile on my face and impression in my life.

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**My American family and friends**, for loving me from afar. I promise I’m coming back sometime, and I know you’ll be there for me when I do. That means a lot.

**I dedicate this to all readers, for the inspiration to cook, feed, laugh, love, connect, think, feel, and fill the world with the love of universal nourishment, in whatever way feels right.**

## *Introduction*

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Anthropological studies of food and its reflection in culture is a densely growing topic, and with good reason. The two are inextricably linked as both naturally result in societal organization. The need for nourishment and sensual pleasure leads to the development of what is now called “cuisine,” or a recognized framework of food profiles belonging to a segment of the world. Culture not only absorbs this “cuisine,” but fashion, media, music, visual art, professions, and religion. Despite each being a defining food in a unique way, the prevalence of spiritual life in India serves as an unmistakable root of strong culinary traditions. Many pilgrimages to India are seeking inventive and exotic flavors, while others seek inspirational and explorative spiritual journeys. When these combine, it transforms into a process of cultural discovery.

Vaisnava cuisine is the ultimate conglomeration of both important aspects of cultural identity. The most outstanding factor at first often is the seemingly strict guidelines of the diet; no meat, onions, and garlic is enough to shock many cooks of other cultures. Once invested in an exploration of the Vaisnava community, however, the fare loses shock value as the sheer devotion surfaces. Not only is food viewed as a way to bring the body closer to a spiritual existence, but is utilized as a devotional technique to incorporate every aspect of daily life into the religion. In Vaisnavism, god is the ultimate focus. Devotion is a revered way of connection to the divine, therefore participating in daily worship is necessary. Each action taken throughout the day by a devotee is motivated by their love, including their culinary habits. Through the exploration of food as devotion, deeper truths and important aspects of Vaisnavism are uncovered. This cultural archaeological process offers revelations about the relationship between religion, food, traditions, and the derived identity.

*An Introduction to Vaisnavism*

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IN HINDUISM, THE MOMENTOUS EVENT OF A FOUNDATION AT ONE POINT IN TIME, THE INITIAL SPLASH IN THE WATER, FROM WHICH CONCENTRIC CIRCLES EXPAND TO COVER AN EVER-WIDER PART OF THE TOTAL SURFACE, IS ABSENT. THE WAVES THAT CARRIED HINDUISM TO A GREAT MANY SHORES ARE NOT CONNECTED TO A CENTRAL HISTORICAL FACT OR TO A COMMON HISTORIC MOVEMENT.

- PROFESSOR K. KLOSTERMAIER: HINDUISM - A SHORT HISTORY

IN INDIA WE BELIEVE EVERYTHING OCCURS IN CYCLES. INSTEAD OF ‘WHEN?’ IT BECOMES A QUESTION OF ‘WHICH WHEN?’.

- DR. SATYANARAYANA DASA

### **A Brief History of Hinduism and Vaisnavism**

The system of spiritual and religious philosophy deemed “Hinduism” is in fact thousands of years older than the term itself. “Hindu” began as a geographic identifier for those below the Indus River and later was associated with the belief system.<sup>1</sup> Some following the faith prefer the term *sanatana-dharma*, which literally translates to “eternal principles.”<sup>23</sup> Deriving a history of this “eternal religion” is nearly impossible, and manifests in two schools of thought, the traditional and modern. Those following the Vedic scriptures (*nastika*) typically accept the traditional set of beliefs, while scholars and others who reject the Vedic canon (*anastika*) developed the modern timeline.

In the traditional system, everything occurs in cycles resulting in repeated manifestations of similar incidents. Hinduism consequently predates history itself. The world is in a round of

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<sup>1</sup> Chari, S.M. Srinivasa. *Vaisnavism: Its Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Discipline*. Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Dasa, Dr. Satyanarayana. Interview by author. Personal interview. Vrindavan, India, April 22, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> For scholarly and convenience purposes, the term “Hindu” will be used in this work to refer to the expansive collection of beliefs synonymous with *sanatana-dharma*.



*maha-yugas*, or “Great Ages.”<sup>4</sup> As the ages progress, humanity is considered to diminish in spiritual abilities. The present age, *kali-yuga*, began 5,000 years ago, and is believed to be the last stage before the cycle refreshes. The *Vedas* upon which the ideology is based were written down at the beginning of this degenerative age because the retention of humanity was decreased in such a way that the scriptures could no longer be successfully orally transmitted. At the end of this *kali-yuga*, the avatar of Vishnu known as Kalki will come to destroy all corruption, cleaning the earth to prepare for the next cycle.

On the other side of the spectrum scholars have used modern anthropological techniques to determine a more palpable timeline of the progression of Hinduism, spanning from approximately 3000 BCE to the present day. The subsequent history contained in this work will utilize both methods of analysis accordingly to establish a dual-awareness of the history of this ancient culture.

Hinduism encompasses countless sects, cults, beliefs, etc. with Vaisnavism included. Vaisnavism simply means worship of lord Vishnu, a god who appeared in only 5 hymns in the book of the *Vedas* known as the *Rgveda*.<sup>5</sup> The famous story of Vishnu’s *trivikrama*, “three steps,” from the *Rgveda* established Vishnu as an all-encompassing deity as he crossed the underworld in one step, the physical world in another, and the world of the gods in the third. This powerful being was at first simply the companion of the most prevalent *Vedic* god Indra, but as society developed the original, more specific deities became less relevant. Vishnu, a vague, powerful, compassionate figure whose name literally means “one who is all pervading,” became an easily

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<sup>4</sup> ISKCON Educational Services. "Continuity and Change." Heart of Hinduism: [http:// hinduism.iskcon.org/tradition/00.htm](http://hinduism.iskcon.org/tradition/00.htm) (accessed April 23, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Entwistle, A.W.. "History of Vaisnavism." Srimatham. [http://www.srimatham.com/uploads/5/5/4/9/5549439/history\\_of\\_vaishnavism.pdf](http://www.srimatham.com/uploads/5/5/4/9/5549439/history_of_vaishnavism.pdf) (accessed April 26, 2014).

modifiable focus of worship. Rather than the fierce deities needed for invaders, a gentle, nurturing god was appropriate for the growing, settling civilizations. Other vague theosophical and philosophical deities also merged with Vishnu as time passed, most importantly Narayana. Narayana too, is all encompassing, himself in everything and everything in himself. The association with Vishnu was also natural due to their similar iconographical pose. Narayana translates to mean “lying on the waters,” while Vishnu lies, holding all of creation, on a serpent upon the cosmic waters. In 4th c. BCE the *Vedic* divinity Vasudeva-Krsna was worshipped, but with the progression of the sacred Vaisnava text the *Mahabharata*, he fused with Vishnu-Narayana to form the basis of Vaisnavism. Later the characteristics of Vasudeva reappear in the Vaisnava Krsna, although that transitional process is unclear to historians.

The *Bhagavatas* and the *Pancharatras* originally existed as separate entities as well, the former following the scriptures of the *Bhagavata Purana*, the latter eventually supplying the ritual manuals for Vaisnavism. This process also resulted in the widespread non-*Vedic* patterns of worship being accepted as orthodox, to an extent diversifying and liberalizing Vaisnavism.

From the 4th to 9th c. CE the basic repertoire of Vaisnavism was consolidated into the *Puranas*. These texts merely transformed the complex, Sage-written *Smriti* into straightforward stories to modernize and make the teachings accessible.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously, by 6th c. CE the ten main avatars of Vishnu that reside on Earth were established, offering more modes of worship under the umbrella of Vaisnavism.<sup>7</sup> The twelve Alvars are the earliest vernacular devotional poets, and are accredited with spreading Vaisnavism through south India during the 7th to 9th centuries CE. Though their biographies were written in 13th c. CE and therefore lack a large

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<sup>6</sup> Dasa, Dr. Satyanarayana. Interview 2.

<sup>7</sup> Entwistle, "History of Vaisnavism."

amount of historical fact, their poems written in Tamil pervaded the southern portion of the country, bringing many more people to worship Vaisnava as well as the now-popular Krsna.

The largest movements in Vaisnavism after 1000 CE are the four main *Sampradayas*, or sections, that originated through various Earthly founders. These sections differ in exact relationship between the supreme soul and the phenomenal world, but all fall under the auspices of Vaisnavism.

### **The Basic Texts and Doctrines of Vaisnavism**

Many branches of Hinduism abide by the caste system which divides society into levels of respectability, from the most holy Brahmin to the non-Hindu “untouchables.” Be that as it may, Vaisnavism upholds a more egalitarian standard in which no caste system or strict exclusivity exists. It is a path for everyone devoted to spirituality. In the *Bhagavad-Gita* Krsna illuminates the inherent equality in spiritual life when he tells Arjuna, “The humble sage, by virtue of true knowledge, sees with equal vision a learned and gentle *brahmana* (priest), a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a dog-eater (untouchable).”<sup>8</sup> Each of the revered Vaisnava texts subsequent to the *Vedas* serve to connect to people with different methods through various stories, deities, writing styles, etc. The *Mahabharata* developed from the 5th c. BCE until 400 CE, and tells the story of a rivalry between the *Kauravas* and *Pandavas*.<sup>9</sup> Within this expansive collection of volumes resides the *Bhagavad-Gita*, in which Krsna explains dharmic duty to the hero Arjuna in a question and answer format. This imitates the more ancient *Upanisads*, and both are consequently easily read and relatable.

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<sup>8</sup> Radhakrishnan, S.. *The Bhagavadgita*. Chapter 5, Verse 18. India: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993. 5.18

<sup>9</sup> Entwistle, "History of Vaisnavism."

The previously mentioned development of more vague, compassionate godheads similarly engendered a feeling of acceptance and equality. Vishnu possesses six principle qualities: all power, all knowledge, supreme strength, supreme majesty, unlimited energy, and absolute self-sufficiency.<sup>10</sup> He is not, like many early deities, devoted only to conquering an enemy, exploring new lands, or any other specific qualities needed in the deities of early civilizations. Instead, his qualities are universally pertinent, attracting a wider array of followers. The emergence of Vasudeva-Narayana between 4th c. and 2nd c. BCE particularly attracted the working, agricultural classes through the close association of then-prominent Samkarsana, or Balarama, who holds a plow and enjoys intoxicating drinks. Centuries later the Avatara doctrine enabled Vaisnavism “to acquire a cultural unity throughout the area in which it spread, helped the orthodoxy to accommodate regional religious traditions and enabled rulers to promote the idea that they were themselves some form of avatara.”<sup>11</sup> The *Puranas* developed these stories to mirror Vishnu’s compassion for mankind.

Krsna, the 8th avatara, was greatly influential in the development of *bhakti*, the way of love and devotion. *Bhakti* is regarded as a participation of the soul in the divine, creating an incredibly intimate connection with religion. To spread this intense feeling of devotion, Krsna was adapted accordingly to become a loving, tangible character that naturally induces strong emotional connections. His early years especially highlight his playful, loving nature as he danced with cows, cowherd boys, and cowherd girls in the Vrindavan-Mathura area known as Vraj. The devotion for Krsna remains a passionate, reciprocated love between the devotees and the divine.

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<sup>10</sup> Chari, S.M. Srinivasa. *Vaisnavism: Its Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Discipline*.

<sup>11</sup> Entwistle, "History of Vaisnavism." page 13.

There exists a plethora of ways to show devotion, and each person discovers their own modes within them. *Navatha* or *Navatha Bhakti* means “nine ways of devotion” that are expected to be performed. They are: hearing and reading, meditating, chanting the glories, serving the lotus feet (representative of god’s entire being), performing *pooja* (worship) every morning and evening, bowing, acting as a servant, acting as a friend/lover/child, etc., and surrendering completely to the divine. *Jnana-yoga* (study, meditation), *karma-yoga* (actions and rituals), and *bhakti-yoga* (devotion and surrender to the personal god) are also common tools to connect with the divine. The path of devotion is a lifelong mission to develop and incorporate each method to attain unity with god.

The ultimate goal of Vaisnavism, as in the broader context of Hinduism, is to escape the cycle of rebirth through pure love and devotion of the divine. The *atma*, the Self or soul, is believed to be a fragment of the supreme being in Vaisnava culture. Therefore enlightenment is the separation of *purusha*, soul, from *prakrti*, matter. When this state is achieved, the cycle will be broken and the *atma* will be allowed to once more be eternally united with the beloved god.

### *An Introduction to Ayurveda*

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“THE WISDOM OF AYURVEDA IS PROFOUND AND ETERNAL. IT HAS HEALED MIND, BODY, AND SOUL FOR MILLENNIA.”

- VAIDYA NANAK CHAND SHARMA

### **The History of Ayurveda**

Ayurveda is the most ancient medical science known to humanity, emerging from India over five thousand years ago.<sup>12</sup> This science originates in the *Vedas*, the ancient manual containing instructions for living in this world. These books are believed by many to be divine

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<sup>12</sup> Chauhan, Partap. *Eternal Health: The Essence of Ayurveda*. Faridabad, India: Jiva Institute, 2000.

knowledge, passed orally through hundreds of generations before ever being written down somewhere between 4000 and 6000 BCE. The *Vedas* not only contained instructions for the spiritual path, but for the day-to-day life as well. Ayurveda falls under the latter category, literally translating to mean “the science of life.” Thousands of years ago, a group of *rsis*, or learned people, chose an enlightened sage by the name of *Bhardwaja* to obtain the answers for a healthful life through divine inspiration. *Bhardwaja* then taught this knowledge to one of his disciples who did the same. This tradition of *parampara*, or the passing of knowledge from guru to disciple, continued for thousands of years until it was transcribed into the written form of Sanskrit.

Between 1000 and 500 BCE Ayurvedic scholars compiled the knowledge of health from the *Vedas* into collections of relevant information known as *samhitas*, three of which are still extant. *Caraka* deals with fundamental concepts, disease, and herbal medicines, *Susruta* with anatomy and surgery, while the *Aṣṭāṅgas* present an overview of the each. Within Ayurveda there are many more specific branches that encompass all aspects of health, addressing all the needs of the sick for thousands of years before modern medicine was developed. It is still commonly practiced in the Eastern hemispheres, and is now gaining interest in the Western hemispheres as its benefits and wisdom are rediscovered.

### **The Basic Principles of Ayurveda**

The aim of Ayurveda is to maintain health and cure disease.<sup>13</sup> To perpetuate good health, Ayurveda preaches balance of everything and listening to one’s self. To help each person hone their skills of self-healing, this ancient science addresses all parts of a person with four main

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<sup>13</sup> Chauhan, *Eternal Health: The Essence of Ayurveda*.

foci: body, senses, mind, and soul. Each must be in optimal condition to result in complete health. Balance becomes the most apparently prominent principle of Ayurveda with each level of the science.

According to Ayurveda absolutely everything has energy, and is an amalgamation of the *Panchamahabhutas*, the Five Great Elements.<sup>14</sup> These elements each have corresponding characteristics that appear throughout the world as well. They are: ether (space), air (movement), fire (transformation), water (cohesion), and earth (structure and form). These five elements are basic, logical, and exist in every being on the planet. Within human beings they merge in various balances to create *doshas*. There exists no easy, direct translation from many Sanskrit terms such as this, but instead a collection of English words aids in the definition. *Dosha* commonly translates to “biological type” or “physical constitution,” while also meaning “that which contaminates.”<sup>15</sup> *Doshas* are not naturally poisonous, but are the root of disease when out of balance within the body. There are three *doshas* that appear naturally in various equilibriums in each body, and each contains two elements. Ether and air unite in *vatta*, fire and water appear as *pitta*, and earth and water come together in *kapha*. Most people have two principle *doshas*, designated at birth. There is no “bad” or “good” constitution, but each must be treated differently. One’s own *doshas* can be discovered through an array of questionnaires or examinations with an Ayurvedic professional, and help determine the correct lifestyle for achieving the utmost health.

*Guna* refers to the psychological constitution of an individual. Similarly to the trifecta of *doshas*, *gunas* appear in different ratios within each person. These, however, are not inborn, but

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<sup>14</sup> Garivaltis, Hilary. "Introduction to Ayurveda Series." Class Lecture, Vrindavan, April 22-25, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Chauhan, *Eternal Health: The Essence of Ayurveda*.

instead are determined by the environment and nutrition.<sup>16</sup> The *triguna* consists of sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic. A *sattvic* mind is calm, happy, organized, patient, polite, intellectual, compassionate, etc. This is the preferred dominant state of mind, as it leads to a happier, more fulfilled life. The *rajas* mindset is greedy, ambitious, egotistical, jealous, malicious, angry, and cynical. A *tamasic* psychology is ignorant, lazy, fearful, unmotivated, overindulgent, and utterly selfish. Clearly the latter two *gunas* are less than desirable and create strife. Nevertheless, each is necessary in a balanced person. A prominently *sattvic* mind allows for a peaceful, loving life, but the motivational drive of *rajas* and the ability to allow the body to do nothing inherent in *tamas* are also necessary for a pragmatic lifestyle. These *gunas* each appear in food and the environment, so by altering the exterior influences one can consequently alter the *triguna* into a positive equilibrium.

One of the most powerful tools to align one's life in Ayurveda is the *dinacharya*, or daily routine.<sup>17</sup> Ayurvedic texts advise people to align activities with the flow of nature, allowing the different *dosha*-centered activities to fall within the corresponding *dosha*-prominent time period. For example, the time around sunrise is predominately *vatta*, therefore activities such as meditation and study and organic, beneficial activities. The ancient texts also advise about hygiene, exercise (such as daily yoga and meditational practices), and all other aspects of daily life. Allowing the body to fall into alignment with the natural rhythm of the world increases productivity, restfulness, and health.

The common Ayurvedic phrase "like increases like" helps teach the way to a steady lifestyle. Increasing *sattvic* foods and routines increases a *sattvic* psychology. Similarly, if a

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<sup>16</sup> Chauhan, *Eternal Health: The Essence of Ayurveda*.

<sup>17</sup> Garivaltis, "Introduction to Ayurveda Series."



*kapha*-oriented person consumes a large amount of *kapha*-increasing foods or partakes in *kapha*-increasing activities, the body will be out of balance and may begin the path towards disease.

There are six steps of disease in Ayurveda, each a further progression with different prescriptions for attending to the ailment. The initial three stages are the early signs of an imbalance which only the individual can truly identify. Adjusting the food, environment, and routine ensures the quickest and easiest route to recovery. In the more advanced levels of illness more intense herbal treatments, cleansing, and aid from an Ayurvedic doctor are required. The treatment is a tower of methods, and the basic adjustments must still be made in order to give the body a strong foundation for healing.

Ayurveda also places a great emphasis on digestion and *agni*, the digestive fire. A regularly functioning *agni* maintains the stability of all aspects of a person.<sup>18</sup> There are many ways to regulate an upset digestion through nutritional intake. Incorporating the six tastes in every meal in amounts proportionate to constitutions is a key factor in health. These six tastes, namely sweet, salty, sour, bitter, pungent, and astringent, should appear in every Ayurvedic meal.

By maintaining the body, mind, and senses in this way, the soul inherently follows. Once physical and mental strain are removed from daily life, spirituality is allowed to take the foreground, becoming yet another part of the daily routine of making a healthy, happy person.

### *The Collaboration of Vaisnavism and Ayurveda*

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WHATEVER THE PERCEPTION OF THE PURELY GUSTATORY ASPECT OF PARTICULAR FOODS, THE ISSUE OF THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HEALTH, THE PURITY, AND THE MORAL AND MENTAL BALANCE OF THE CONSUMER ARE NEVER FAR OUT OF SIGHT. [...] THE CASE COULD BE MADE THAT THE CONVERGENCE OF THE MORAL, SOCIAL, MEDICAL, AND SOTERIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FOOD CONSUMPTION IS NOWHERE GREATER THAN IN TRADITIONAL HINDU INDIA.”

- ARJUN APPADURAI, “HOW TO MAKE A NATION CUISINE: COOKBOOKS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA”

<sup>18</sup> Garivaltis, "Introduction to Ayurveda Series."

Despite the topic of Ayurveda at first seemingly straying from Vaisnavism and its cooking, it is in actuality so closely related that one is hardly discernible from the other. Tracing this relation to its origin is nearly impossible, however. Just as the beginning of *Vedic* religions predates known history, so does the *Vedic* science of life considering they arose from the same source. Therefore, Ayurveda and Vaisnavism in some form have existed concomitantly for the entirety of their existence. Ayurveda was not the exception; it was the way of life. Using the native foods and herbs to heal is an ancient science that came before any technology, and sustained the health of a people for thousands of years.

The connection between the two fields goes much deeper than merely existing simultaneously. Many characteristics of are reflected in both. The *Trimurti*, or holy trinity of Hinduism, comprises of the three main godheads, each with a specific defining role that is reflected in the *gunas* of Ayurveda. Brahma the Creator is associated with *tamas*, Shiva the Destructor with *rajas*, and Vishnu the Sustainer with *sattvic*.<sup>19</sup> These *gunas* reflect in the practices of the followers, therefore Vaisnavas aim to achieve a *sattvic* nature to become closer with Vishnu. Ayurveda perspicuously details the path to attaining the appropriate *sattvic* lifestyle.

The central Ayurvedic principle of balance between mind, body, senses and soul not only leads to a healthy daily life, but a healthy spiritual life as well. When the physical self is functioning properly the spiritual Self is allowed to blossom, and a deeper level of devotion is more easily attainable.<sup>20</sup> In his discourses on the *Srimad Bhagavatam* Dr. Satyanarayana Dasa teaches that peace can only come with a peaceful mind. A mind obsessed with the physical

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<sup>19</sup> Dasa, Dr. Satyanarayana. Interview 2.

<sup>20</sup> Chauhan, *Eternal Health: The Essence of Ayurveda*.

senses cannot achieve this happiness and peace.<sup>21</sup> If the mind is occupied with anger, hostility, sadness, lust, greed, etc. it is not truly dedicated to god. Ayurveda teaches that an abundance of *rajas* in the lifestyle is reflected in scattered, fiery thoughts. In the same way, too much *tamas* can create lazy, unmotivated, and negative thoughts. None of these will bridge the gap between the human and the supreme, ergo only a truly *sattvic* mind is pure enough to achieve enlightenment.

In the same way, having spiritual guidance in the forms of teachers, scriptures, and habits contributes to the Ayurvedic definition of balanced health. The all-accepting nature of Vaisnavism encourages those on the path of spirituality to explore what creates balance in their personal lives, making it a welcome way for many to fulfill that portion of Ayurveda. Although worship of Vaisnava deities is not inherent in the Ayurvedic lifestyle, the teachings, like many religions, are universal and are naturally discovered in a life of equilibrium. Ayurveda, however, is a natural part of every Vaisnava's lifestyle in some form.<sup>22</sup> The two are inseparably linked by time, mindset, and motivation.

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<sup>21</sup> Dasa, Dr. Satyanarayana. "Srimad Bhagavatam Lecture Series."

<sup>22</sup> Parbhoo, Subhadradasi and Sharada. Interview by author. Personal interview. Vrindavan, India, April 8, 2014.

*The Basic Characteristics of Vaisnava Cuisine*

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THE WHOLE ACT OF EATING MUST NOT BE DONE  
INDEPENDENTLY FROM THE LORD. YOU DON'T WANT TO ENJOY  
SEPARATELY FROM YOUR BELOVED. [...] YOU ACCEPT THAT  
WHICH IS FAVORABLE AND REJECT THAT WHICH IS  
UNFAVORABLE TO KRISHNA.”

- SUBHADRADASI PARBHOO

To those first approaching the Vaisnava food traditions, the most outstanding qualities are the excluded foods. Traditional Vaisnavas do not consume meat, fish, eggs, mushrooms, garlic, onion, and carrots. Each exclusion exists for a specific reason, all for the combined purpose of achieving the ultimate connection to the divine.

Vegetarianism is a typically common characteristic of Hinduism due to the negative karmic effects of any violence and murder. Every text of the major religions of the world contains verses prohibiting violence and killing.<sup>23</sup> Even beyond this, Hindu scriptures from the *Vedas* to the stories of different sects exhort the reader to abstain from the consumption of dead animals. The advice ranges from simple instructions (“Let one therefore shun the use of meat.”) to pleas for kindness (“Who can be more cruel and selfish than he who augments his flesh by eating the flesh of innocent animals?”), to graphic imagery intended to revolt (“Having well considered the disgusting origin of flesh and the cruelty of fettering and slaying of corporeal beings, let one entirely abstain from eating flesh.”). Whatever the rhetoric, meat is clearly deemed uncouth for consumption.

Cows are also considered sacred in the scriptures, especially in Vrindavan when Krsna spent his childhood days as a cowherd. Thus, in addition to banning the use of a slaughtered cow,

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<sup>23</sup> Dasa, Adiraja. *The Hare Krishna Book of Vegetarian Cooking*. Hong Kong: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1989.

all dairy products and those who produce them are the most holy of all. The care of cows is considered an extremely important *seva*, or service, to the lord. This loving treatment of cows results in the best possible product for use in the kitchen in addition to all other holy rituals in which the dairy products are used.

The law of *karma* is also a prevalent motivation to sustain a vegetarian lifestyle. *Karma* translates to “action,” and the law of *karma* states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.<sup>24</sup> Thus committing an act of violence against another creature affects the offender negatively in the next life, perhaps even demoting him from the valued human life to a similarly helpless creature. Murder is also considered as an interruption of one’s life cycle, so by shortening the life unnaturally it can perpetuate a lower form of existence for that soul as it did not fulfill the intended duration.<sup>25</sup> This, of course, reflects negatively upon the *karma* of the doer. Even if one does not commit the act of killing the animal, the indirect act of indigestion affects *karma* in the same way. Despite the fact that plants, too, are living beings they are considered to have a less evolved consciousness and ability to feel pain. They are, whenever possible, raised organically with love and care, and harvested and used with the same sensitivity of the fact that life was sacrificed for the sake of the meal.

The other ingredients, however, are at first seemingly random and central to the creation of flavor. These omissions stem from the Ayurvedic principles of sattvic cooking. Eggs and mushrooms are both highly *tamasic*, as eggs are considered the waste of a chicken and mushrooms thrive in dung. Garlic, onion, and carrots produce extraordinarily high amount of

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<sup>24</sup> Parbhoo, Interview by author.

<sup>25</sup> Dasa, *The Hare Krishna Book of Vegetarian Cooking*.

*rajas*, and are considered aphrodisiacs.<sup>26</sup> These ingredients therefore pull the mind and body away from the *sattvic* path that leads to spirituality.

Their subsequent elimination from the diet does not, however, leave a bland cuisine. Garlic and onion are commonly used in Western vegetarian cooking, but with the use of an equally sharp-tasting spice called asafetida as well as the array of other common spices of Indian cooking, the food is far from lacking flavor. The promoted herbs of Ayurveda also add flavor and nutrition to every meal. Rishi Verma, the executive chef of the new restaurant Sattviko in Delhi, left his prestigious post as sous chef of the Taj Hotel to help begin the completely *sattvic* restaurant. Rather than simply removing the non-*sattvic* ingredients he instead utilizes unique blends of spices, textures, vegetables, etc. with a satisfying, wholesome result.<sup>27</sup> The eliminated ingredients only serve as a way to be closer to the lord, and are only restrictions if seen in that way. For those devoted to a relationship with Krsna, the diet simply allows them to share everything with him, decreasing the divide between the spiritual and material worlds with every *sattvic* bite.<sup>28</sup>

Fasting for certain holidays, birthdays of saints or deities, or significant days of the Hindu calendar is also common in Vaisnavism. Observers fast through elimination of grains or eating only fruits for the day, while some go to the extent of no food with or without water.<sup>29</sup> Different lineages within Vaisnavism observe different days of fasting depending on the holidays relevant to the gurus and saints within that sect. Some fasting days are universal in Vaisnavism such as

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<sup>26</sup> Chauhan, *Eternal Health: The Essence of Ayurveda*.

<sup>27</sup> Varma, Rishi. Interview by author. Personal interview. New Delhi, India, May 29, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Parbhoo, Interview by author.

<sup>29</sup> Devi, Dr. Jaya. Interview by author. Personal interview. Vrindavan, India, April, 20, 2014.

*Ekadasi*, the 11th day of the Hindu calendar, occurring twice a month. On this day it is traditional to avoid grains, but some also choose to do more extensive fasts these days. Fasting is not meant to be unpleasant, but rather a way to further eliminate distraction from the divine on auspicious days. Limiting choice brings focus to the designated spiritual importance. The fare on such days is still diverse and well-spiced as is pleasing for the deity, but uses different varieties of energy-sustaining vegetables in the place of grains to maintain equilibrium in the mind and body.

### *The Act of Making Prasad*

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IF YOU WANT TO FILL THE WORLD WITH LOVE THEN I SUPPOSE  
YOU COOK WITH LOVE...FEED WITH LOVE.

- SUBHADRADASI PARBHOO

There is a common belief in Vaisnavism that *prasad* is the most delicious food in the world. The secret ingredient: love. From the growth of the ingredients to the process of eating, the Vaisnava culinary lifestyle revolves around pure *bhakti*, or the devotional love for god. All food is offered to the lord before consuming. This act of offering consequently defines the Vaisnava diet. Only the most *sattvic* foods are offered the most *sattvic* being, therefore only the most *sattvic* foods are consumed by Vaisnavas. Ayurveda gives the scientifically determined *sattvic* food, while the Bhagavad-Gita and other scriptures further expound the philosophical reasons.

The kitchen itself must be completely *sattvic*, for the environment and mood in which food is prepared affects the health and taste of the final product. The cleanliness of the food manifests itself in many ways: hygiene of the space, hygiene of the cook, hygiene of the consumer, and purity of all minds involved.<sup>30</sup> A Vaisnava kitchen in India may not look like the

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<sup>30</sup> Chauhan, *Eternal Health: The Essence of Ayurveda*.

shining industrial monster of the American television show kitchens, but cleanliness is still maintained. It is swept every day and kept organized enough for the chef to maneuver easily throughout the cooking process. The cook is always bathed with clean clothes and hands. While cooking, a purely devotional mindset is mandatory. Vaisnavism discourages any sensual pleasure disconnected from god, including smelling and tasting. A lustful eye only perpetuates lust in the mind. By waiting to enjoy the food until after it has been formally offered, the enjoyment is left for the beloved god, the most deserving of such sensual pleasures. In this line of thought, the only smelling of the cooking food is to quickly assess the balance of spices, and the food is never tasted before being offered. A seasoned Vaisnava cook has the ability, in one quick sniff, to assess the level of salt and spice in a dish, leaving the rest to sight, feel, and experience. To maintain a clean mind in the case of a female cook, she must not be menstruating as this is a time of overwhelming emotional and physical turmoil for many women. This easily results in a more *rajasic* or *tamasic* mindset by the natural hormonal imbalances that occur during menstruation. This kind of energy, when put into the food, is not purely *sattvic* and accordingly not fit for *prasad*. During the menstruation time women either avoid the kitchen, or if this is not possible, they often do not offer the meal as *prasad* out of respect for the sanctity of the lord's food.<sup>31</sup> Many cooks, in order to focus on devotion to god while cooking chant mantras, sing devotional songs, or actively pray during the preparation process.<sup>32</sup> Others, comfortable in their devotional cooking calmly and quietly cook. All perpetuate the meditational mindset to deposit only positive energy into the meal.

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<sup>31</sup> Mai, Krishna. "Ayurvedic Cooking Class." Class Lecture, Vrindavan, April, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Parbhoo, Sharada. Interview by author.



After the best possible ingredients have been collected and cleanliness ensured, the true magic of cooking begins. Each cook, whether in a home, ashram, or even restaurant, has their own methodology and style that comes through in the food. The most crucial characteristic, of course, remains devotion. Because the meal is approached in such a devotional, meditative manner, the cook is never panicked, rushing, frustrated, worried, etc. It is also disciplines selflessness because “the ego is taken completely out of it. [...] What comes through and what is being offered is the Self.”<sup>33</sup> It becomes the ultimate practice of *yoga*, or union with the self and the divine.

Measurements in Indian cooking are pinches and handfuls and taste-testing is forbidden, thus the same dish culminates differently each time. Nothing is prescribed or planned to the teaspoon, and the cooking process becomes an act of *raganuga bhakti*, or spontaneous devotion. As Vaisnav devotee Subhadradasi says, each time “something changes, and that’s beautiful.” The spontaneity is “lined up with what you are trying to achieve from a spiritual perspective,” in that it is not confined to any schedule or prescription.<sup>34</sup> Vaisnavas believe that simply allowing the divine inspiration to enter the cooking process results in a successful, blessed meal. As Dr. Satyanarayana Dasa explains, “In India, our whole lifestyle is like that. You are not put into a block. There is always a possibility of improvising.”<sup>35</sup> Nothing is stagnate in spirituality, which is reflected in the ever-burgeoning world of spiritual cooking.

In the kitchen of the Jiva Institute for Vaisnava Studies the chef is an unassuming middle-aged man from Bengal who typically wraps a pink fuzzy towel around his waist over his clothing

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<sup>33</sup> Parbhoo, Subhadradasi. Interview by author.

<sup>34</sup> Parbhoo, Interview by author.

<sup>35</sup> Dasa, Dr. Satyanarayana. Interview by author. Personal interview. Vrindavan, India, April 11, 2014.

as an apron.<sup>36</sup> In the cooking space he negotiates the collection of unlabeled, reused plastic jars of spices with ease, tossing in handfuls of this and capfuls of that without concern or reservation. He uses a *dagat*, the traditional tool for cutting vegetables constructed so the operator sits on the ground on the wooden base. Using confident, skilled hands, he methodically cuts pounds of fresh vegetables from the organic garden, allowing the waste to collect on the ground. He gently hums the same five note succession of notes as the meal quickly unfolds around him. Soon into the process every surface contains pots with vegetables soaking, boiling, and frying, rice cooking and draining, spices frying, dough rising, more oil heating...at any given point in the process there are at least eight different pots going at once. Yet the devoted mastermind in the center of it all remains calm and confident, never losing track of a single ingredient. His gentle, joyful mood evades the space, giving the air of a parent lovingly preparing their child's favorite dish. At every quizzical look from an observer he generously and cheerfully answers. A curious guest is not enough to break the meditational mood, even as they question each dash of spice and the contents of every pot. It is as if the atmosphere surrounding him and the food would be the same if there were a crowd people in the kitchen all yelling at once. Soon the various vegetables and spices have miraculously come together in the form of an organized meal for at least twenty people, and there is a batch of chapati dough the size of a human baby being kneaded to life on the counter. On any given day the chef prepares anywhere from fifty to two hundred chapati, and in seemingly no time there is a stack of freshly cooked chapati topped with ghee ready for the meal. In a matter of two and a half hours a complex and large-scale meal comes together without panic. The final step, of course, is to offer a plate of all the food to Krsna, accompanied by

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<sup>36</sup> Dayal. Ashram meal preparation. Personal observation. Vrindavan, April, 2014.

incense and the ringing of a bell to bring attention to the freshly prepared food. After allowing Krsna time to consume his feast, the food is served to the eagerly awaiting guests. In just a few hours, the entire process will be repeated in order to serve the next meal of the day.

### *Offering to God*

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THE DEVOTEES OF THE LORD ARE RELEASED FROM ALL KINDS  
OF SINS BECAUSE THEY EAT FOOD WHICH IS OFFERED FIRST FOR  
SACRIFICE. OTHERS, WHO PREPARE FOOD FOR PERSONAL SENSE  
ENJOYMENT, VERILY EAT ONLY SIN.

- BHAGAVAD-GITA, CHAPTER 3 VERSE 13

The act of offering the food is a crucial constituent of Vaisnava cooking. Only after offering comestibles to the divine is it considered *prasad* and allowed for enjoyment. This is done by first placing a small portion of the meal topped with the sacred *tulsi* leaf on a plate reserved for the deities. The plate is then placed in front of the deity, whether it is a picture or figure, and a bell is rung while chanting a mantra in the mind to signify to the lord that food has been served. After waiting a few minutes to allow the divine to consume and therefore bless the food, the bell is rung once more and the food is removed. That portion, now considered to have been ingested by god, is mixed with the food to similarly bless the entire meal. Only then can the food be enjoyed.<sup>37</sup> The famous story of Prahlad in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, one of the many Vaisnava scriptures, discusses the mood of true enjoyment.<sup>38</sup> He informs that peace only comes with a peaceful mind. Humans suffer due to the attachment to satisfying the senses, so by detaching from this material pleasure the mind is allowed peace. From this peace and spiritual loyalty stems the true happiness of love, for love itself is happiness.

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<sup>37</sup> Premanidi. "Ayurvedic Cooking Class." Class Lecture, Vrindavan, April, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Dasa, Dr. Satyanarayana. "Srimad Bhagavatam Lecture Series." Class lecture, Vrindavan. April 3-25, 2014.

Food, however, tends to be considered a purely sensual activity appealing to all bodily senses. If allowed to be the focus of eating, sensual pleasure can occupy the mind in a way that distracts from the focus of the love of a devotee. By combining the devotional act of cooking with the process of offering, however, the food becomes a symbol of devotion rather than material satisfaction. After the material substance adopts a deeper meaning it can be relished with the proper focus on the lord.<sup>39</sup>

The meaning of the words surrounding offering themselves offer important insight into the sanctity of sharing food with the deity. *Prasad* translates to “grace” or “mercy,” while the act of eating is deemed *prasad seva*, or “service to god.”<sup>40</sup> The term *prasad* itself demonstrates the gratitude involved in the Vaisnava lifestyle. By deeming blessed food as the mercy of the divine, it humbles the consumer and reminds them daily of their belief that all things in their life are given by god. Love is the most powerful mode of connection to the deity, and food is the most palpable connection to the entire being. Therefore consuming the grace of god brings grace to the entire being.

In Vaisnavism, everything belongs to god. The division between the spiritual and material worlds is only created by humans. To combat this mindset, Vaisnavas unite the food that becomes the body with the divine, removing all possessive aspects. Building the self with *prasad* serves to offer everything one does. Despite the ritualistic manner of offering food, it serves as a demonstration of love, not a survival requirement. The love in Vaisnavism flows both ways, so by serving the “master” the “servant” also receives joy. Putting the blessed fuel into the body

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<sup>39</sup> Parbhoo, Interview by author.

<sup>40</sup> Dasa, Dr, Satyanarayana, Interview 1.

aids in closing the gap from the divine with mutual happiness rather than widening it with insatiable sensual obsession.

Despite dictating the guidelines of offering and consumption, the scriptures also display the accepting nature of Krsna. There is a verse in the Bhagavad-Gita in which Krsna says, “If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, fruit or water, I will accept it.”<sup>41</sup> Devotee Subhadradasi points out “it’s not so much what is being offered, because those are all very simple things. What makes them special to him is the love and devotion.”<sup>42</sup> Krsna is not materialistic for he is the supreme spiritual being, but instead desires *bhakti*, or devotional love. The verse from the Bhagavad-Gita serves to support this conclusion, but is not the only source of this conclusion. One of numerous additional examples is a widely known story of Krsna’s time on Earth that portrays his emphasis on love. Krsna is the guest of honor in a household and the devotee is overwhelmed with excitement, whirling about to supply everything for the lord. The devotee peels bananas to serve him, but in his excitement, throws out the banana and give Krsna the peel. Krsna not only eats the banana peels, but relishes them, simply because they were given in such a strong devotional mood. The simple act of offering the food symbolizes the mutual bliss resulting from unconditional love between the divine and devotee. By putting that into the food it too can create supreme pleasure.

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<sup>41</sup> Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*. 9.18

<sup>42</sup> Parbhoo, Interview by author.

## *The Spirituality of Food*

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EVERYONE HAS TASTED THESE MATERIAL SUBSTANCES BEFORE, BUT NOW, THESE SAME INGREDIENTS HAVE TAKEN ON EXTRAORDINARY FLAVORS AND UNCOMMON FRAGRANCES. [...] IT IS TO BE UNDERSTOOD, THEREFORE, THAT THESE ORDINARY INGREDIENTS HAVE BEEN TOUCHED BY THE TRANSCENDENTAL NECTAR OF KRISHNA'S LIPS AND IMBUED WITH ALL OF KRISHNA'S QUALITIES.

- SRI CHAITANYA MAHAPRABHU

Yet another question arises from the interplay of religious philosophy and cuisine; if the body is not the spiritual Self, why is there so much concern about how to fuel the vessel that is the physical body? It is true that the *Srimad Bhagavatm*, in its teachings against materialism advises the devotee to only worry about the Self rather than the “gross body,” as the physical body is deemed.<sup>43</sup> However it also proclaims the value of the human life in balancing *karma* and attaining enlightenment. The human life is a rare and important opportunity to create something permanent from something temporary. In order for the physical body to bring one to a place of enlightenment it must be treated as a vehicle for spirituality, therefore with the utmost respect and care. If the mind and body are filled with *rajasic* or *tamasic* qualities, a *sattvic* life will be all the more difficult to attain. Maintaining a *sattvic* lifestyle ables the body to become a temple itself, creating a proper place for spiritual exploration.

In this way, food becomes the means to a higher goal. Those on the spiritual path are not lusting for food as a way to satisfy their sense, but instead consume *prasad* as a way to become closer to god. Although food is a necessity of this world, the act of connecting it to god through offering enables it to attain the level of spiritual as well as physical fuel. The movement away from the “Eat Sleep Mate Defend” lifestyle of the animal world often signifies development in

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<sup>43</sup> Dasa, Dr. Satyanarayana. “Srimad Bhagavatam Lecture Series.” Class lecture, Vrindavan. April 3-25, 2014.

civilization.<sup>44</sup> The goal of enlightenment means disconnecting from the thought that the body is inextricable from the spiritual Self. Only by removing physical ailments can the focus be aimed towards spiritual gratification. This also requires a lack of overindulgence, or again the senses become dulled by obsession and even pain. Attaining union with god is considered the ultimate goal, and real love is not based on the body, but the Self inside. Utmost care for the physical self while retaining the emphasis towards the holy path results in the purest spiritual experience.

### *Identity and Tradition*

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TO ACCOMPLISH ITS GOALS, A SOCIAL GROUP EMBRACES EVERYONE IN THE POWERFULLY EMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES OF RITUAL, CEREMONY, AND CELEBRATION. INEVITABLY, SUCH INTENSE AND ALL-INVOLVING ACTION INVOLVES FOOD. FOOD IS A BASIC AND UNIVERSAL HUMAN CONCERN.

- E.N. ANDERSON, EVERYONE EATS: UNDERSTANDING FOOD AND CULTURE

In a culture and religion that has existed for what is considered eternity, a singular identity is impossible to distinguish. Vaisnavism has spread worldwide and changes as devotees follow the world into modernization. Within India alone traditions have been forced into malleability with the 1000 years of successive invaders inserting their own cultural identity. The history of India is rich with incursion from all sides and cultures. From this influence India gained foods such as chilies, tea, potatoes, tomatoes, papayas, cashews, tamarind, cauliflower...the list goes on and on, with each item emitting a slight shock from those familiar with modern Indian cuisine.<sup>45</sup> Each of the aforementioned items is used heavily in Indian cuisine, including Indian Vaisnava cuisine. Many new items are not considered within the Ayurvedic

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<sup>44</sup> Dasa, Dr. Satyanarayana. "Srimad Bhagavatam Lecture Series."

<sup>45</sup> Storm, Dr. M.N. "Food and Memory." Class lecture, National Identity and the Arts, School of International Training, Delhi. April 5, 2014.

instructions as they were not yet extant within the region of *Vedic* culture.<sup>46</sup> This change escalated during the British Raj from 1858 until 1947 when India gained independence.<sup>47</sup> During the previous rules the education system had typically been allowed to remain under the rule of the native Indians, but to assert power and gain admiration, the British systematically replaced the existent Indian education with the Western system of education.<sup>48</sup> This revised indoctrination in the younger generations was the catalyst for more permanent changes in national mindset concerning food and culture. With the recent increased influence of American media in India, the “ideal” of Western culture has pervaded the younger generations. Not only does it appear in Bollywood films, clothing, shopping malls, etc., but also prominently in the food culture. Restaurants began emerging throughout the country within the past few decades, a very recent development in comparison with the Western restaurant culture.<sup>49</sup> Previously, travelers would only eat in homes, ashrams, or cook food for themselves. This also changed the value of food as a spiritual, connecting entity as is tradition in India. Especially considering the Ayurvedic principle of “you are what you eat,” this mechanized, rushed food trend is detrimental to the mentalities of consumers. American-style “fast food” and packaged products palpably affect the health of the body, mind, senses, and soul. It is often the Indian expatriates who proudly uphold the traditions of their ancestors more than Indian citizens.

This progression towards Western and industrialized food increases with each innovative, forward-thinking generation. Because of the common portrayal of the West as a place of

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<sup>46</sup> Dasa, Dr, Satyanarayana, Interview 1.

<sup>47</sup> Storm, Dr. M.N. “Religion Drop Off Discussion.” Class lecture, National Identity and the Arts, School of International Training, Delhi. January 26, 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Dasa, Dr. Satyanarayana. “Srimad Bhagavatam Lecture Series.” Class lecture, Vrindavan. April 3-25, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Dasa, Dr, Satyanarayana, Interview 1.



sophistication, this mindset denies some of the qualities of the native culture. Dr. Satyanarayana Dasa identifies the change of education with the decline in Indian pride, combating it through equally powerful, qualified education. He began Jiva Institute for Vaisnava Studies in part to sustain this education, and now runs a school of 1600 children in Faridabad, India. Through this children learn what food affects their minds and bodies in what way, and how to lead healthy, productive lives. This education does not deter from modernization, but instead places a sense of pride and worth in the traditions of knowledge in India.

Vaisnavism diets in India inevitably sway with the changes in food culture, but maintain the core culinary values due to the higher motivations for the eating habits. It also discerns itself through the incorporation of the strong culinary traditions of India. There is a range from macro to micro identity with Vaishnava cuisine; on one end there is the worldwide identity united by sheer love, devotion, and overall practices, and on the other, the personal, local, ancient traditions passed on by family and friends. At each level there is a uniting factor in the faith due to the universality of devotion to god. If someone on the Vaisnava path travels to any other Vaisnava home in the world, the food may reflect the local diet and agriculture, but will still follow the guidelines and will be true *prasada*. Some sects of Hinduism create divides in the world by restricting whom can eat with whom, acceptable sources, and other such divisive properties. Due to the lack of caste system in Vaisnavism, even those outside the faith are able to commune with the Vaisnava community and share in their devotion through the simple act of partaking in a meal together. Because food acquires such spiritual power in the Vaisnava tradition, it is identified with the divine love, and by sharing this food with the world, they purvey that love. Whether it be to a stranger, family member, or the deity itself, each meal is

served with honest compassion. The notion of something as simple as food being the uniting factor to some may seem farcical, but the strength in that simplicity is apparent in Vaisnavism.

Nevertheless, food is an incredibly unique art form in many ways. The same dish prepared in different situations by different people is distinctive in taste. Not only do technical aspects of dishes change, but the very emotion behind the food also affects the result. The difference is not in the actions, but rather the consciousness. Comparing cooking, devotee Subhadradasi explains the distinguishing factor that, “what makes it unique is the love, the emotion with which you offer it and the emotion with which I offer it.”<sup>50</sup> But she also points out that this does not cause a divide. The commonality of food united with the common cause of devotion, eliminates all differences. Though Indian cuisine is moving away from tradition, Vaisnavism will always maintain the core meaning behind food. The Vaisnava food traditions are therefore eternal, just as the religion itself.

Food is a universal expression of intimacy. The sharing of food, whether in a home or at a large festival, connects people through the commonality of nourishment and enjoyment. It in itself is a language that conveys messages of identity and emotion. Unlike language, however, “food is usually about being warm, homey, religious - anything broad and deep, but little that narrow and defined,” allowing it become universal in the truest sense.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Parbhoo, Interview by author.

<sup>51</sup> Anderson, E.N. *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2005. Print. Page 112.

## Conclusions

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Food is a crucial part of survival and self development, but still must be incorporated into the higher goal in Vaisnavism of attaining enlightenment by disconnecting from the material world. Through the transformation of simple physical fuel into *prasad*, the religion and the food cease to be separate entities. The cuisine, still Indian in nature, is filled with vegetables, spices, and love, making it unique to the religious community within the national community. Due to the large Vaisnava population in the country, the whole of India also reflects this smaller cultural identity. Vaisnavism is thus reflected in the grander scheme of the nation whether in taste or technique.

Beneath what Vaisnavism has achieved in a national sense, it continues to accomplish its original goal of *sattvic* living by rewarding devotees with reciprocated devotion through the daily sustenance. Just as the religion is considered everlasting, so is the important unity of cuisine and faith. The scriptures of Vaisnavism declare that nothing is more powerful than love. If you do not act on love it is useless, but when harnessed it becomes the most powerful entity of all. Only through this power can the believer achieve unity with the supreme divine. Such a powerful force can only be harnessed through daily mental absorption in spiritual matters. Incorporating all aspects of life, whether it be friends, family, ritual, or food creates an identity so strongly united by a focus to a higher goal that the influence in the world is undeniable.

The cultural identity of Vaisnavism depends not on the spices or flavors that result from the cooking process. Instead the Vaisnava identity is formed through the sheer love and devotion that overflows from each follower. It is this pure attachment to something beyond earthly desires that unifies the culture while simultaneously making it extraordinary.

### *Recommendations for Further Study*

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The anthropological study of food is a densely growing topic, as it varies so greatly and expresses so much about each culture. The Vaisnava cuisine differs between sects of Vaisnavism in India and around the world. The diet of a Vaisnava cook in Russia is very different from India, and the reflections of cultural influences on the devotional practices deserves a worldwide research effort. The aspect of Vaisnava devotional cooking is considered so crucial in enhancing the flavor profile of the food. However, in other cultures, whether religious or not, a study of perceived taste difference in relation to preparation techniques can test the Vaisnava mindset in various environments. An investigation of the modernization of cultural pride, religion, and food would be fruitful for identifying the cultural movements throughout time. Modern food in India, whether it be in a restaurant, home, or street cart, is a manifestation of contemporary culinary movements. The comparison of all aspects of health, devotion, and the subsequent affects of the existent differences would lead to a better image of the modern culinary age. Because food and religion are both such broad topics, the studies are endless. One thing is certain: any exploration of a cuisine rooted in culture and vice versa creates strong statements concerning both.

Possible sources include:

- Jiva Institute for Vaisnava Studies
- Many of the sources cited in the bibliography of this work, both giving insight and further references for basing study.

## Glossary

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**Agni:** the digestive fire in the body

**Atma:** the divine Self or soul, believed to be a fragment of the divine in Vaisnavism

**Avatar:** an earthly embodiment of Vishnu

**Ayurveda:** the ancient indigenous science of Indian medicine which stems from the *Vedas*

**Bhagavad Gita:** literally “song of god,” telling the story of Krsna teaching Arjuna about *dharmā*

**Bhagavata Purana:** one of the most popular Puranas, containing the famous stories of Krishna, also known as the Srimad Bhagavatam

**Bhakti:** the path of loving, devotional service to god

**Dharma:** the duties of human beings to live according to the codes of conduct contained in the holy scriptures

**Dosha:** literally “that which contaminates,” but considered to be the physical constitution

- **Kapha:** the biological energy associated with earth and water (heaviness, mucus, etc.)

- **Pitta:** the biological energy associated with fire and water (passion, bile, etc.)

- **Vatta:** the biological energy associated with air and space (motion, dry, etc.)

**Ekadasi:** the 11th day in the Hindu calendar, occurs twice a month, usually a day of fasting

**Guna:** the psychological constitution of an individual

- **Rajas:** passionate, active, sharp

- **Sattvic:** pure, genuine, spiritual, honest

- **Tammas:** ignorance, darkness, dilution

**Jiva Institute for Vaisnava Studies:** An institute committed the preservation and promotion of ancient Indian systems of knowledge.

**Karma:** literally “action,” the idea that every action has an equal and opposite reaction

**Krishna:** a principal deity, one of the avatars of Vishnu, often considered the Supreme

**Narayana:** a *Vedic* deity whom eventually merged with Vishnu

**Prakrti:** physical matter

**Prasad:** literally "mercy," any item sanctified by offering to God, most commonly food

**Puranas:** literally "old," texts containing the many popular religious stories of Vaisnavism

**Purusha:** another word for soul (*atma*)

**Raganuga bhakti:** spontaneous devotion

**Sampradayas:** the four main modern sects of Vaisnavism founded by different divinely inspired leaders

**Seva:** literally "service," typically for the lord

**Smriti:** ancient religious guidelines, considered to be divinely given through sages

**Trimurti:** the holy trinity of Vaisnavism consisting of Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu

**Tulsi leaf:** a plant sacred to Vaishnavas, used as a garnish for all food offerings to god

**Vaisnavism:** a sect of Hinduism focused on the worship of Vishnu and his avatars

**Vasudeva-Krsna:** an ancient godhead whom eventually merged with Vishnu-Narayana

**Vishnu:** an originally minor, vague deity from the *Vedas* that progressively grew into the focus of Vaisnavism

**Vedas:** literally "knowledge," the scriptural basis of Hindu religion and culture

**Yoga:** any practice with the aim of obtaining union, especially with the Supreme

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