

Ahimsa & Food: *Hand-Made Food*

By Sri Swami Mayatitananda

Karuna was a twelve-year-old girl who developed an aversion to food. Her parents tried all kinds of therapies but could not get Karuna to eat, and she was wasting away. In desperation, her mother attended my food sadhana workshop and remained afterwards to seek my help. Having helped many people to recover from eating disorders, I understood that aversion to food is a sign that we are feeling separated, alienated from joy, love, and life itself. I inquired about the foods that Karuna once liked and advised her not to force the child to eat, but to demonstrate, instead, the simple art of eating with the hand. Karuna's favorite meal used to be *kichadi* (basmati rice, yellow split mung, cumin seeds, and ghee), so I advised her mother to make a pot of kichadi every morning and to imbibe this food with her right hand in Karuna's presence. "Ahh," exclaimed Karuna on the first morning, "I love the way you are eating that food." "Would you like to feel the food on your hands, Karuna," asked the hopeful mother, and Karuna quickly responded "Yes." Karuna felt the food on her hands, smelled it, and then tasted it. The next day she ate the kichadi from her own bowl with her hand. This is how Karuna began to eat again. Through the sacred instrument of her own hands she was able to reconnect to the energy of life.

The Vedic people knew the power ahimsa and healing held in the hand. Special hand gestures called *mudras* (derived from the root *mud*, "to delight" or "to gladden") were used to receive and gather the universe's energy and to seal off negative influences from entering the body and mind. Today, these hand mudras are used in many ways. In Hindu rituals the priests use these sacred mudras to worship the deities. Thousands of Hindus bring the palms of their hands together in front of the heart in prayer (*anjali mudra*), and utter the sacred word *namaste*. In meditation, the most commonly used mudra is chin mudra (also called *jnana mudra* or "wisdom seal").

The ancient native tradition of eating food with the hands is an ahimsa practice derived from mudra practice. Gathering the fingertips as they touch the food stimulates the five elements and invites *agni* to bring forth the digestive juices. Each finger is an extension of one of the five elements. Each serves to aid in the transformation of food before it passes on to internal digestion. The sadhana (spiritual discipline) of feeding yourself from hand to mouth enhances your vital memory and strengthens your sense of balance. Once we are connected to the actions of our hands, we cultivate the memory of ahimsa in every action we perform.

An extension of the sadhana of eating with the hands is to use our body as the ruler and measuring cup for all our needs. In keeping with this principle, you need to become comfortable using your hands and eyes for all culinary measurements. In Ayurveda, the term *anjali* also refers to the volume that can be held by your two hands cupped together. Two *anjalis* of grain or vegetables from your hands is designed by nature to fill your own stomach. When you are cooking for others prepare two *anjalis* for each adult and one

anjali for each child. Likewise gauge your spices or accents with your own pinch. Like your handful, it is tailored to provide a suitable amount for your own personal body needs. *Angula* refers to the distance between the joints of each finger. This unit of measure is cosmically designed to gauge spices and herbs, such as cinnamon sticks and ginger.

Use only those tools that are absolutely necessary. As soon as possible, give up measuring cups, spoons, and useless kitchen paraphernalia. These adjuncts are distracting and interrupt your direct energetic exchange with the food. It may be difficult at first to take this conscious step to trust the accuracy of your own physical-spiritual apparatus. With time, you will become comfortable enough to return to the original and most natural system of measurement.

Your hands should partake fully in all food preparation. Knead your energy into the dough, massage your hands with the grains, pat the chapatis and roll the rice balls between your palms. Allow the universal energy to mix with and transmute your own energy. Puree sauces and mash potatoes with your hands. Tear leafy greens gently with your fingertips. When the hands must have a medium, use the grinding stone or mortar and pestle, the *suribachi*, for the positive energy provided by clockwise motion. This is sadhana. The closer to nature each utensil or apparatus, the more connected the prepared food will be to the energy of the cosmos.

A hand filled with sadhana is a hand of ahimsa –one that will heal others. It is charged with the *prana* of the five elements, which when used harmoniously is in constant touch and exchange with nature. This exercise gives poignant vitality to our subtle energies, held within the core of the universe’s memory until we are ready to use them. The *Rig Veda* states, “My hand is the Lord. Boundlessly blissful is my hand. This hand holds all healing secrets. Which make whole with its gentle touch.”•

Sri Swami Mayatitananda (Maya Tiwari) is a pre-eminent spiritual teacher who has transformed thousands of lives with her healing presence. She is a pioneer of Inner Medicine healing and Living Ahimsa programs. She is the spiritual head of Wise Earth School of Ayurveda, and the founder of Mother Om Mission, a charitable organization taking holistic health education and services to at-risk communities around the world. Mother Maya has authored Women’s Power to Heal through Inner Medicine, The Path of Practice, Ayurveda: Secrets of Healing, and Ayurveda: A Life of Balance, www.wisearth.org.

Originally published by Hinduism Today Journal 2004
And by Yoga International Magazine in 2008