

Fatal Fat

A two inch tongue can kill a six feet man. This traditional saying is being confirmed by modern obesity statistics. The prosperity of the Indian middle class is showing up – in a not-so-pleasant way in the burgeoning waistline of over 25% of urban Indians.



The same trend – from prosperity to obesity – is seen globally. 60% of all Americans are either overweight or obese. Obesity is the cause of diabetes, hypertension, heart attacks, stroke and a variety of other chronic diseases. If left unabated, obesity is set to overtake smoking as the number one cause of preventable death in USA.

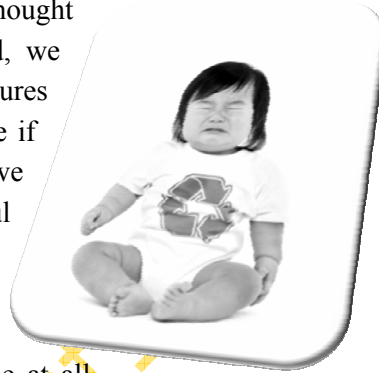
Another striking statistic: WHO statistics show that over 1 billion people are overweight globally as compared to the 800 million starving. In other words, more than the people suffering due to starvation are the people suffering (or set to suffer) due to overeating. Here is the crowning irony of the conflict between the haves and the have-nots: losers suffer due to lack of resources – and winners suffer more due to excess of resources!



Health experts say that, though biology, temperament, stress and environment all contribute to obesity, mainly unhealthy eating habits – influenced largely by aggressive advertising of fast foods – are behind the obesity epidemic. So they suggest that increased nutritional awareness and change of food habits can check and reverse obesity. Advertisements for weight loss programs abound. Many of these help, yet the national and international percentage of obese people keeps increasing. Why?

Because most weight loss programs rely on external controls – diet restrictions, physical trainers, exercise routines, pills – all of which are inherently fragile and unstable. As soon as the external controlling factor is removed, the fat reappears.

Some other experts recommend change of thought patterns. When we are mentally disturbed, we seek external relief through instant pleasures like fast foods and end up obese. Therefore if we cultivate tranquil and happy thoughts, we will no longer need the shelter of harmful pleasures. This approach goes deeper, but is it deep enough? We live in stressful times where dangers threaten our mental peace at every moment. To maintain mental balance at all times, we need to reach further into our spiritual core.



The Vedic scriptures explain that our current existence is three dimensional – body, mind and spirit. *Svaasthya*, health is a result of *sva astitah iti Svaasthya*, being situated in harmony with our nature. As souls, we are infinitesimal parts of the supreme soul, God. Therefore real harmony occurs when our body, mind and soul are in harmony with God.

When we cultivate a satisfying devotional relationship with God, we experience the greatest possible inner fulfillment. That unlimited happiness is our birthright, but being spiritually uninformed, we are searching for infinite happiness in the realm of finite matter. Unfortunately, this misdirected quest for happiness is not just unproductive, but also counterproductive. That's why most enjoyment turns out to be unhealthy, even hazardous. Smoking makes us prone to lung ailments, drinking to liver problems, promiscuity to AIDS and other STDs – and overeating to obesity.

Most people assume that they can't enjoy life because they don't have enough money. But obesity statistics prove that, even if they get all the money in the world to eat whatever they like as much as they like, still they will not be able to enjoy unlimitedly because their body limits their capacity to enjoy – inescapably. And does the same principle not apply to all other forms of material enjoyment? Therefore Srimad Bhagavatam (1.2.10) asserts


that for harmonious living, we should seek food for nourishment – and enlightenment for fulfillment.

1. Higher taste: We can experience spiritual fulfillment through prayer, meditation – and especially through chanting the holy names of God. As soon as dawn arrives, we extinguish the candle that was earlier indispensable. Similarly, once spiritual enlightenment dawns in our heart, we will eschew harmful sensual indulgences, that were earlier irresistible – not reluctantly, but joyfully. When we experience God's infinite protection and love streaming into our hearts and lives, both the main causes of overeating – the innate craving for pleasure and the desperate search for relief from distress – will be tackled at the root. We will discover an inner treasure of devotion, which offers simultaneously the highest pleasure and the safest relief. Then self-restraint will cease to be an exercise in self-denial; it will become a welcome catapult for our further spiritual enrichment.

2. Spiritual diet: When we become spiritually awakened, we will naturally eschew all harmful foods – not just the foods that increase the fat in our bodies, but also the foods that cause our innocent, helpless brothers – the animals – to lose their bodies to fatten ours. That is, we will naturally choose vegetarianism to protect our own health and the animals' lives. But the Bhagavad-gita (3.17) urges us to go beyond vegetarianism to Krishna-tarianism, to offer our vegetarian food with love to God, Krishna. The food thus sanctified becomes *prasad* or mercy. *Prasad* not only nourishes us physically, but also awakens us spiritually to our natural joyfulness.



Therefore, irrespective of whether we are obese or not, let's direct our quest for happiness inwards and thus stimulate our spiritual fulfillment – and also facilitate our own physical health and that of our starving fellow humans. Lest we shy away from a spiritual solution and seek a material palliative instead, Albert Einstein's verdict on

problem-solving can prod us on, "Problems cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them." 

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