

Nutrition from a Bahá'í Perspective: Food for the Body, Food for the Soul

Margaret Tash, R.D.

Today, I would like to talk about an aspect of the Bahá'í Faith that may not seem to be 'spiritual' but has its roots deep in the Revelation given us by Bahá'u'lláh.

I'll share the following:

First, there will be a brief introduction about food and the part it plays in our lives. Then, we'll discuss how the principles of the Faith relate to the food choices we make. Last, we'll discover ways to put into action these spiritual principles.

The attachment with quotations is really just a small sampling of what is available in the Bahá'í Writings on this topic. The last page of that attachment includes references and websites, as well as an 'action plan' component. It is my hope that we will study this together in more depth.

It is important to remember this is my personal understanding of one approach to food and nutrition based on the Bahá'í Writings. My presentation evolved drastically from my initial plan of approaching nutrition from a clinical point of view. As I deepened and studied on our relationship with food, I saw the unity and interconnectedness of all the Writings on this topic.

So, how do we approach food and nutrition from a spiritual angle? While there is not a Bahá'í 'diet,' we do have some guidelines about where we – as a civilization – will be heading in the future. It's a process, individually and collectively, of moving towards health, not just for ourselves, but for every living thing on the planet.

We are not under any obligation to follow any of these suggestions, of course. But if we have the desire to explore more deeply these principles, we can move closer to understanding them in a new light.

In our first section, let's explore some ideas about food. We need food to survive, plain and simple. We can't live without it. But, our relationship with food goes far beyond mere survival. Food encompasses feelings of love, community, and connection. Culturally, through the ages, food played a role in keeping a group bonded together, and social traditions were often passed down from generation to generation, usually centered around celebrations and feasts.

But now, beyond that, the food choices we make, in this day, have a huge impact on every living thing – on other people, on animals, on plants, and on the environment. We need to embrace global thinking in the food choices we make. We are not just a family or a tribe or a village ... It's not about us anymore!

We often think of food in self-centered ways. It might be to control our outward appearance – to be a certain weight; to fit into a certain size jeans; or to 'look good' to others. All of these thoughts are based on cultural and material perceptions from our culture. They are not based on our spiritual reality. So we tend to look at food from a self-centered view and not from a spiritual perspective.

We might ask ourselves for the first time:

Why do we eat?

What is the purpose of choosing the foods we do?

If it's not to get 6-pack abs, then why should we care about what we eat? Here is a thought from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to answer that question:

"Looking after one's health is done with two intentions. Man may take good care of his body for the purpose of satisfying his personal wishes. Or, he may look after his health with the good intention of serving humanity and of living long enough to perform his duty toward mankind. The latter is most commendable." - 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Star of the West, Vol. VIII, No. 18, p. 230; The Throne of the Inner Temple, p. 19

Now we know why we should eat healthfully. But, what next? There's no Bahá'í diet. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá did give us some glimmerings of where we need to go. You might be familiar with this quotation:

"The food of the future will be fruit and grains. The time will come when meat is no longer eaten. Medical science is yet only in its infancy, but it has shown that our natural diet is that which grows out of the ground. The people will gradually develop up to the condition of taking only this natural food."
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 296

I would like to clarify here that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is referring not only to fruit and grains. In other writings, He speaks of legumes, nuts, oils, and vegetables as part of the diet humanity will move towards.

Further, 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks about the bodily differences between carnivores and humans. He states that our teeth are shaped to grind grain or to bite into fruit, not to tear meat apart. Our digestive tracts are also very different from carnivores, and aid us to break down and absorb food thoroughly. Speaking to this aspect, He says:

It is, therefore, quite apparent according to the implements for eating that man's food is intended to be grain and not meat. When mankind is more fully developed, the eating of meat will gradually cease." - 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 170

Now, we have a bit more insight. So how does this diet 'Abdu'l-Bahá addresses – less meat, more grains and fruits and vegetables, a simpler diet – how does this diet connect to the spiritual principles of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation?

Let's start discussing the principles of the Faith and compare them with this style of eating that 'Abdu'l-Bahá encourages. One of the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Faith is the independent investigation of truth. It's our duty to investigate and search for truth our whole lives, so that we can integrate what we learn in the material world, into what we know from spiritual laws and principles we've been given.

This is our challenge! We, especially those of us in the Western world, live in a meat-heavy society. But we are encouraged by the Bahá'í Writings to move forward, away from current societal standards. Are we willing to investigate the truth as it relates to ourselves, our individual lives, and not simply reflect the values of society around us?

Another Bahá'í principle is unity and the oneness of humanity. This is not some abstract thought which Bahá'u'lláh gave us. We are one people. What does that have to do with what you eat? It means that our actions regarding our food choices have a profound effect on other people, often with negative results. We'll learn more about this later.

If we really believe we are one people and we believe in the unity of the human race, then we would not want our actions to harm our brothers and sisters around the world. In fact, we would do everything we can to protect and assist them, wherever they live. We'll learn later how our actions can promote the oneness of humankind.

We are told in the Bahá'í Writings to show kindness to animals. I won't speak at length about what happens to animals now who are raised in our farm factories. From the time they are born, they are raised in overcrowded condition, and end their lives in horrific slaughterhouses. Their entire lives are spent in horrible circumstances. We buy meat in 'pieces' so we don't have to think that some living creature died – often under terrible conditions – for us. Remember that, then listen to these words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

"Regarding the eating of animal flesh and abstinence therefrom, ...he [man] is not in need of meat, nor is he obliged to eat it. Even without eating meat he would with the utmost vigour and energy. ... Truly, the killing of animals and the eating of their meat is somewhat contrary to pity and compassion, and if one can content oneself with cereals, fruit, oil and nuts, ... it would undoubtedly be better and more pleasing." – 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in a letter written to an individual believer; in Lights of Guidance, p. 294

The elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty is another principle of the Bahá'í Faith. How does that relate to the food choices we make? The U.N. World Food Program reports that 25,000 people die each day from hunger-related causes. Many of these are children under the age of 5.

Another one billion people do not have enough to eat. That is one-sixth of the earth's population, more than the United States, Canada, and the European Union combined. There is a huge discrepancy between those who have too much to eat, and those who have nothing at all and who suffer the consequences.

Listen to what Adib Taherzadeh, who served on the Universal House of Justice, wrote about the people of the future:

The nobility of man and his spiritual development will lead him in the future to such a position that no individual could enjoy eating his food or resting at home while knowing that there was one person somewhere in the world without food or shelter." - Adib Taherzadeh, The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, vol. 3, p. 126

This is surely a worthy goal worthy of our efforts.

Do science and religion agree in respect to this new diet? Science is catching up with what 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote in the early 1900's. In fact, since that time, our diet has worsened regarding the consumption of meat. After World War II until the present time, our meat intake has skyrocketed and a number of health problems now plague us because of this. Science has proven that a diet which contains less meat and has more grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables, is associated with less obesity and a decrease in heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and cancer, among other illnesses.

What does your body look like on the inside? How are you nourishing it? This is more important than your physical appearance. Taking good care of our health enables us to serve humanity more fully, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us.

'Abdu'l-Bahá also speaks of foods being used to cure diseases in the future. Those quotations can be found in the attachment.

The love of nature and protection of the environment are other aspects of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh loved and cherished nature deeply. The Bahá'í Writings are filled with exquisite testimony to the beauty of the world around us. Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

"Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world." - Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 142

Yet, Bahá'u'lláh also warns us to care for the environment, that we should not abuse it as we have:

"...ye walk on My earth complacent and self-satisfied, heedless that My earth is weary of you and everything within it shunneth you." - Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, Persian #20

The following statistics are from the World Resources Institute:

50% of all grains raised in the world are used for livestock feed

30% of the land surface of the earth is devoted to animal agriculture.

70% of all fresh water is used for animal production (i.e., watering crops which are fed to livestock, water

used to livestock, as well as water used in the slaughtering of animals and food production.

According to the U.N. Environmental Program, 17% of the Amazon's original forest has been lost to animal grazing and agribusiness. It is estimated that 50% of the rainforest will be lost in only 20 years.

The U.N. notes that "...the livestock sector emerges as one of the top 2 or 3 most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems at every scale, from local to global."

It's now estimated that nearly one-fifth (18%) of the world's greenhouse gases comes from methane produced by livestock. This is more than all the world's planes, buses, cars, and trains ... combined. Worse, global warming leads to climate changes, including droughts which often result in the starvation and death of many in other countries. Real people – our brothers and sisters – suffer the consequences of our food choices.

The Universal House of Justice, in 1989, wrote:

"...assisting in endeavors to conserve the environment in ways which blend with the rhythm of life of our community must assume more importance in Bahá'í activities." - Letter from the Universal House of Justice, April 21, 1989, to the Bahá'ís of the World; in Conservation of the Earth's Resources; in The Compilation of Compilations, vol. I, p. 86

Have you heard about the low-carbon diet? No, we're not talking about the low-carb diet! The low-carbon diet seeks to decrease our 'carbon footprint' by the food choices we make. It emphasizes especially a lower meat intake to decrease methane production, as well as buying foods more locally to decrease consumption of petroleum products for transportation.

Producing one pound of beef causes as many carbon emissions as driving your car 440 miles. It's been said that it's better to drive a Hummer and eat a veggie dog, than to drive a Prius and eat a hot dog. I guess the best choice is to drive a Prius and eat a veggie dog!

Now, let's tie in some spiritual components. Do we think our physical actions – what we do and what we eat – affect our spiritual growth? Is that possible? Here is what 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

"Between material things and spiritual things there is a connection. The more healthful his body the greater will be the power of the spirit of man." - 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Star of the West, Vol. VIII, No. 18, p. 231; quoted in The Throne of the Inner Temple, pp. 19-20

Other virtues such as moderation, frugality, and simplicity are all encouraged in the Bahá'í Writings. You don't have to live in sack cloth or work on a farm to embody these virtues. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

"Economy is the foundation of human prosperity.... It is more kingly to be satisfied with a crust of stale bread than to enjoy a sumptuous dinner of many courses, the money for which comes out of the pockets of others. The mind of a contented person is always peaceful and his heart at rest. How happily such a man helps himself to his frugal meals! How joyfully he takes his walks, how peacefully he sleeps!" - 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, p. 102

Other virtues we're encouraged to apply include gratitude and mindfulness. How do we practice gratitude and mindfulness when we talk about food? The idea is to become more aware of the food choices we make, whether we are shopping, preparing our meals, or eating at home or in a restaurant.

We can take a few moments to be grateful, to think of the connections needed to have this food come to us. We're not talking about a ritual but, instead, want to recognize all that it takes to bring food to us. We want to recognize the bounty of having enough to eat in a world where many do not. 'Abdu'l-Bahá often prayed at the beginning of a meal. When we stop for a moment in gratitude, we are remembering God's bounty, and honoring what has been given us.

Now, in this final segment, we will talk about how to put these principles into action. Bahá'u'lláh has given us guidance, to strive beyond merely reading or thinking about ways to change. He writes:

"It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written in reality and action." – Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 165

You may ask: What can I do? What can one person do? Does it really make a difference? Yes, it does make a difference! First, we need to put spiritual principles into action, as Bahá'u'lláh tells us. This is a process. We don't have to be perfect. We simply need to make a start. Any small change we make does matter.

Try to think of these changes as a positive process towards a goal, not as deprivation. After all, when we pray and meditate, we know we are 'depriving' ourselves of time to relax and play. Yet we know that this giving up of a material thing will result in greater benefit and then we do it for that reason. And so it is with changing our food habits. We are building healthier bodies, and building a healthier planet. Even more, it's really about our souls being united, about our being willing to change our actions, for the betterment of the world, and not to be "complacent and self-satisfied," as Bahá'u'lláh warns us.

To make a start, we can pray and study the Writings about this topic, consult with our friends, reflect on the part we play, and then take some action which moves us. There is not one 'right' way to do this. Simply make a start to change your habits, and you will be guided to continue this journey.

Eating less meat is not mandatory, at all. But it is encouraged in the Bahá'í Writings as well as by many other health and governmental agencies, including the U.S. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Like the concept of universal participation, where all contribute for the good of the community, the sum effect of each of us playing our part has an exponential effect on changing the world. Never forget that!

What can we do as individuals or in groups?

First, consider joining the many people who participate in Meatless Monday. What's that? Meatless Monday was started in World War I and used again in World War II, as a way to aid the war effort to support Allied troops. In 2003, Meatless Monday was initiated by the Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health and endorsed by 20 major schools of public health. It was a response to the worsening health status of Americans, to reduce the incidence of preventable disease related to our high intake of saturated fat.

In 2009, Meatless Monday gained global support due to the increasing impact of meat consumption on the environmental health of the planet. Individuals and institutions have taken up the challenge to cut out meat one day a week.

Can you give up meat one meal a week? Or one day a week? Or more?
What else can we do? Here are some more suggestions:

Support local agriculture. Know some of the people who grow your food! Enjoy fruit, vegetables, honey, jam, bread, desserts, and more – all made where you live. Where do you find them? Try farmer's markets; roadside fruit and vegetable stands; food cooperatives and natural food stores which carry local produce; look for 'local' produce at public grocery stores; support CSA's (community-supported agriculture).

When you connect on a personal level with the people who grow your food, it forges bonds of friendship and unity. It is another way to promote the oneness of humanity.

Buy organic or no-spray (no pesticides or herbicides) produce when you can.

If you drink coffee or tea or hot cocoa, buy 'fair trade' when you can. What is 'fair trade'? Fair trade is a system of trading which promotes more equitable global trade, especially to sellers and producers in poorer areas, and it also supports the environment. Fair trade items are more expensive because they represent the actual value of these products. It is simply paying farmers the money which is due them, with justice and equity.

Decrease the amount of food you waste. Buy only what you can use. Depleting natural resources which are then discarded without being consumed is a worsening problem in our society. When our moms told us to clean our plates because people are starving, they were right! Be more aware of what you need and limit what you waste.

Increase your mindfulness and gratitude for all that you do have. This brings you greater awareness and spiritual benefits. Take a moment to express gratitude for all you do have. Feel connected to those who have less. What more can you do?

Consider other ways to help the environment. Need ideas? Buy cruelty-free (products which are not tested on animals) cosmetics, toothpaste, shaving cream, etc. Try natural cleaning products rather than chemical-based ones. Use recycled paper products. Reduce, reuse, recycle! You know all this. ☺

In addition to individual action, a broader concept is needed effect lasting change. Collectively, the principles of the Bahá'í Faith promote the material and spiritual well-being of humankind. What is happening in the international community?

Let's look at the Bahá'í International Community (BIC). The BIC was established in 1948 as an international NGO (non-governmental organization) with the United Nations. The BIC has consultative status or working relations with many UN agencies directly related to food, agricultural, and environmental issues, including UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), WHO (World Health Organization), the UN Environment Program, and the UN Development Program.

And there are many worldwide Social and Economic Development (SED) projects around the world, started by Bahá'ís, based on spiritual principles advocated in the Bahá'í Writings. One example of this is a garden project begun in the 1990's in Mongolia, where the availability of fresh vegetables was scarce and vitamin-deficiency illness prevalent. The project, started by area Bahá'ís, was based on the principles of consultation, being of service to humankind, and promoting community development. They were able to successfully promote small vegetable gardens where none had existed before. This is a sterling example of how spiritual principles can change and empower an entire community.

Even the United Nations and other organizations now look at spiritual values to guide global initiatives:

"The concept of spirituality and spiritual values, once almost taboo in most UN development-related deliberations, is now being articulated at the highest levels." - Bahá'í International Community, Valuing Spirituality in Development

On September 23, 2009, Dr. Rajendra Pachauri, chair of the UN Panel on Climate Change, spoke at the BIC offices in New York City, emphasizing the moral and ethical dimensions of global warming. His comments came as part of the official launch of an appeal directed at world leaders gathered for the UN Summit on Climate Change. The appeal, drafted by the Bahá'í International Community and signed by 25 NGO's, religious groups, and policy institutes, states in part: *The quest for climate justice is not a competition for limited resources but part of an unfolding process towards greater degrees of unity among nations as they endeavor to build a sustainable, just and peaceful civilization.*

What is really needed to make all of these changes we are talking about, whether as individuals or as a society? I'd like to close with this quotation from Shoghi Effendi who wrote, in 1932:

"We need a change of heart, a reframing of all our conceptions and a new orientation of our activities. The inward life of man as well as his outward environment have to be reshaped if human salvation is to be secured." - Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated May 27, 1932, to an individual believer; in The Compilation of Compilations, vol. 1, p. 85