



# **'Let my food, O my Lord, be Thy beauty, and my drink the light of Thy presence, and my hope Thy pleasure...'<sup>1</sup>** **Debbie Tibbey**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The author uses the both the Bahá'í scriptures and generally accepted practice to explore the significance of food. In the Bahá'í writings, the guidance on what one should or should not eat is very simple: only alcohol and carrion, the meat of animals already dead and decaying when found, are forbidden. The guidance regarding what and how one should eat tends towards moderation in all things. Many Bahá'ís follow a vegetarian diet and although this is from choice rather than compulsion, there are passages in the Bahá'í writings which point towards this lifestyle.

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## **Bahá'í Teachings About Food**

Food – essential for our survival, yet so often a minefield of struggle and illness. Most of us in the UK are fortunate to have enough to keep us satisfied, with a bewildering array of choices in supermarkets and restaurants. Information abounds as to which foods, how often and how big a portion we should be having. Advice on nutrients, calorific content, recipe ideas and food combinations fill a seemingly endless supply of books and publications, yet the extremes of obesity, anorexia, eating disorders and addiction show that plenty is not necessarily enough.

In the Bahá'í writings, the guidance on what we should or should not eat is very simple: only alcohol and carrion, the meat of animals already dead and decaying when found, are forbidden. The simplicity of this guidance means that Bahá'ís may eat anywhere, share food with anyone and be able to buy their sustenance from almost any provider. Those coming into the Faith would be free to keep any dietary aspect of their own cultural identity, without having to learn a new set of customs or restrictions. Guidance on almost every aspect of life can be found within the Baha'í writings, so here we will consider what may be gleaned about the food we eat from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Founder of the Faith, and Abdu'l-Bahá, His son.

<sup>1</sup> Bahá'u'lláh *Prayers and Meditations of 'Bahá'u'lláh*, p126, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, USA, 1987 Edition



## Why not alcohol?

Beware lest ye exchange the Wine of God for your own wine, for it will stupefy your minds, and turn your faces away from the Countenance of God, the All-Glorious, the Peerless, the Inaccessible...<sup>2</sup>

In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh's book of laws and guidance, He covers topics as diverse as marriage, obedience to the government, inheritance and the duty to have a trade or profession. Here, too, we find strong condemnation of the effects of alcohol and opiates:

It is inadmissible that man, who has been endowed with reason, should consume that which stealeth it away.<sup>3</sup>

It is for our own well-being and protection, and that of society that we are advised to stay away from mind-altering substances:

Alcohol consumeth the mind and causeth man to commit acts of absurdity, but this opium, this foul fruit of the infernal tree, and this wicked hashish extinguish the mind, freeze the spirit, petrify the soul, waste the body and leaveth man frustrated and lost.<sup>4</sup>

Alcohol may be used only as part of a medical treatment 'under the advice of a competent and conscientious physician, who may have to prescribe it for the cure of some special ailment.'<sup>5</sup>

## Moderation

The golden rule as to food is, do not take too much or too little. Moderation is necessary.<sup>6</sup>

The laws on alcohol and recreational drugs are clear and absolute, but the guidance regarding what and how we eat tends towards moderation in all things:

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 is at rest.<sup>7</sup>

There is a story that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, during His travels to Europe and America in the early 1900s, had been seated with other guests for a fine meal at the home of a Baha'í. Some travellers arrived and presented 'Abdu'l-Bahá with a cotton handkerchief containing dried bread and a wizened apple. They explained that as they traveled through Russia, they met a poor man who dearly wished to be able to travel with them to see Abdu'l-Bahá. As this was impossible, he gave the only thing he had – his daily meal – to be passed on to Him. Abdu'l-Bahá received this gift of love with such joy that he left His own meal to share the dried bread with the other guests.

In His book, *Selections*, Abdu'l-Bahá writes about the connection between excess and disease:

<sup>2</sup> Bahá'u'lláh *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Note 144, Bahá'í World Centre, 1992

<sup>3</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* verse 119

<sup>4</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá quoted in, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p239

<sup>5</sup> Shoghi Effendi quoted in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p227

<sup>6</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, p171, J.E.Esslemont, The Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, 1974 edition

<sup>7</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, p98



Man hath perversely continued to serve his lustful appetites, and he would not content himself with simple foods. Rather, he prepared for himself food that was compounded of many ingredients, of substances differing one from the other. With this, and with the perpetration of vile and ignoble acts, his attention was engrossed, and he abandoned the temperance and moderation of a natural way of life. The result was the engendering of diseases both violent and diverse.<sup>8</sup>

It would appear from this passage that what we consume directly affects our health – and indeed, medical science is increasingly upholding this viewpoint. Many of the ailments and diseases suffered in modern society are a direct result of our lifestyles. If food can cause ailments, can it also cure?

### Food for healing

It is, therefore, evident that it is possible to cure by foods, aliments and fruits; but as today the science of medicine is imperfect, this fact is not yet fully grasped. When the science of medicine reaches perfection, treatment will be given by foods, aliments, fragrant fruits and vegetables, and by various waters, hot and cold in temperature.<sup>9</sup>

Abdu'l-Bahá discussed how medical science should be developed to such a high degree that illnesses will be healed by means of foods:

If, in some component substance of the human body, an imbalance should occur, altering its correct, relative proportion to the whole, this fact will inevitably result in the onset of disease. If, for example, the starch component should be unduly augmented, or the sugar component decreased, an illness will take control. It is the function of a skilled physician to determine which constituent of his patient's body hath suffered diminution, which hath been augmented. Once he hath discovered this, he must prescribe a food containing the diminished element in considerable amounts, to re-establish the body's essential equilibrium. The patient, once his constitution is again in balance, will be rid of his disease.<sup>10</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh stressed the importance of seeing a 'competent physician' in all health matters and of following his/her advice to the full.

In His *Tablet to a Physician*, Bahá'u'lláh advises the following (author's own bullet points):

- O People, do not eat except when you are hungry. Do not drink after you have retired to sleep.
- Exercise is good when the stomach is empty; it strengthens the muscles. When the stomach is full it is very harmful...
- Do not take nourishment except when digestion is completed. Do not swallow until you have thoroughly masticated your food.
- Treat disease first of all through diet, and refrain from medicine. If you can find what you need in a single herb do not use a compound medicine. Leave off medicine when the health is good, and use it in case of necessity...
- Take first the liquid food before partaking of solid food. The taking of food before that which you have already eaten is digested is dangerous...
- When you have eaten walk a little that the food may settle.
- That which is difficult to masticate is forbidden by the wise. Thus the Supreme Pen commands you.

<sup>8</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p.152, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1978

<sup>9</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p.152, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1978

<sup>10</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* verse 60



- A light meal in the morning is as a light to the body.
- Avoid all harmful habits; they cause unhappiness in the world. <sup>11</sup>

Although the medical veracity of these recommendations is beyond the scope and intention of this article, popular knowledge would suggest that they make very good sense.

### **A case for vegetarianism?**

The food of the future will be fruit and grains. The time will come when meat will no longer be eaten. Medical science is still in its infancy, yet it has shown that our natural food is that which grows out of the ground.<sup>12</sup>

Many Bahá'ís follow a vegetarian diet and, although this is from choice rather than compulsion, there are passages in the Bahá'í writings which point towards this lifestyle. There are letters to individuals from 'Abdu'l-Bahá which debate the type and strength of human teeth with regards their suitability for eating grains as opposed to meat, and our lack of claws or talons for catching and tearing apart prey. As with many aspects of the Bahá'í Faith it is said that science again will come to discover these truths as mankind progresses, and indeed, there is no compulsion for Bahá'ís to avoid meat:

...But eating meat is not forbidden or unlawful, nay the point is this, that it is possible for man to live without eating meat and still be strong.<sup>13</sup>

### **Feasting and Fasting**

The Bahá'í calendar is marked with a Fast of 19 days, and nineteen '19 Day Feasts' <sup>14</sup>. The Fast marks the final Bahá'í month before the Naw-Rúz (or New Year) Festival in March. During the Fast, Bahá'ís abstain from eating and drinking between the hours of sunrise and sunset, using the time to pray and meditate and re-focus our spiritual side.

The Bahá'í year consists of 19 months of 19 days. On the first day of each month, a Nineteen Day Feast is held, ("Nineteen Day" being its title, not duration!) This is intended as a time for Bahá'í communities to come together, and consists of three sections: a Devotional where prayers and Holy Writings are recited; an administrative part where the affairs of the community are consulted upon and news shared; and the social, a time to share food and socialise. The Feast is essentially spiritual in nature. Each community is free to celebrate the social part according to their own customs – for some it will be tea and cakes, for others a full cooked meal or 'pot luck', but it is the atmosphere of fellowship, rather than the food itself, which is the most important aspect:

Verily, it is enjoined upon you to offer a feast, once in every month, though only water be served; for God hath purposed to bind hearts together, albeit through both earthly and heavenly means.<sup>15</sup>

The primary intent is to kindle these stirrings of the spirit, but at the same time it follows quite naturally that those present should partake of food, so that the world of

<sup>11</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, published in *Star of the West*, vol.13, no.9, p252, December 1922 and quoted again in *I'll have the Fruit & Grains Please*, Victoria Leith, George Ronald, 2005. (This translation is unauthorised.)

<sup>12</sup> Attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Ten Days In The Light of 'Akka*, pp8-9 by Julia M Grundy, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1979

<sup>13</sup> From a Tablet of Abdu'l-Bahá to an individual, in *Lights of Guidance*, p295, no.1007

<sup>14</sup> 19 months of nineteen days add up to 361 days. Four *Intercalary Days* (five in a leap year) occur before the final month. In these days, hospitality, gift giving and visiting the sick and elderly are undertaken. The final month is the fasting period, with Naw-Rúz falling on March 21<sup>st</sup> of each year.

<sup>15</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* verse 57



the body may mirror the spirit's world, and flesh take on the qualities of soul; and just as the spiritual delights are here in profusion, so too the material delights.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps, then these last quotations sum up the Bahá'í teachings on food, that it is a means to give us the strength to serve and to help us to grow spiritually, to 'take on the qualities of the soul.' Moderation, temperance and food for healing all play a part in our lives whilst accommodating cultures and customs without ritual or rite. We will end with an excerpt from one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prayers for assistance:

...Give us our daily bread and grant Thine increase in the necessities of life, that we may be dependant on none other than Thee, may commune wholly with Thee, may walk in Thy ways and declare Thy mysteries. Thou art the Almighty and the Loving and the Provider of all mankind.<sup>17</sup>

### **Further Information**

*Ocean*, [www.bahai-education.org/ocean/](http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/): a search engine giving access to copious Holy Scriptures from all the world's major religions, is an invaluable tool for research. Quotations can be found searching by book name, religion or key words.

J E Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* serves as a useful introduction to the tenets of the Bahá'í Faith.

*I'll have the Fruit and Grains, Please* by Victoria Leith (see above) deals with diet and lifestyle choices from a Bahá'í point of view. Aimed primarily at young people, the book draws on the Bahá'í writings as well as giving advice on sleep, valuing our own health and even includes vegetarian recipes!

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<sup>16</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 90

<sup>17</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Prayers and Selected Holy Writings*, p27, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Malaysia, 2007 edition