

A Diet for Spiritual Health

By Urmila Devi Dasi

WHEN OUR OLDEST SON was less than three, he and I were once in a supermarket when a woman passing out samples handed him a cookie that looked like ones made at our temple. He was several yards away from me, and I was apprehensive he'd automatically put the cookie into his mouth. Instead, he ran over to me and asked, "*Prasadam? Prasadam?*" I said no, it hadn't been offered to Krsna and couldn't be. He smiled and gave up the idea of eating the cookie.

Training our children to be strict vegetarians can be difficult. Giving them enthusiasm for further restricting themselves to *prasadam*, food prepared for and offered to Krsna, can be even more challenging.

Devotees of Krsna strictly avoid meat, fish, and eggs, and though a growing number of food products don't contain any of these, many products have onions or garlic, which devotees also consider unfit to offer the Lord. Devotees try to avoid commercially prepared food altogether. Krsna is hungry for our devotion, not the food we offer Him, so we need to take time to prepare Krsna's meals ourselves, with love for Him.

Not only the cooking, but also the offering of food to Krsna should be done with love. An ideal offering involves setting up at least a simple altar, putting the food on a plate reserved for Krsna's use, and reciting prayers asking Krsna to accept what we've prepared.

While following the rules for a *prasadam* diet seems troublesome to nondevotees, taking trouble for a loved one is a great source of pleasure. And serving Krsna, the supreme lovable person, gives the greatest pleasure. Children easily feel the happiness of love for Krsna even when very young. As they watch us in the store, we can show them how we read the labels. By age ten, a child can learn to spot listings of meat products such as rennet and choose only suitable food. We can explain to our children how we try to pick the best and freshest items for our Lord.

Most children love to help in the kitchen. While cooking we can create an atmosphere of devotion by singing the Lord's holy names or listening to a recording of devotional singing. As our children help, they learn that Krsna is the first to eat—no tasting while cooking! They can become excited about pleasing Lord Krsna.

As our children mature and gradually learn to prepare varieties of full meals on their own, they are equipping themselves for a life of cooking for Krsna. If, on the other hand, they don't learn cooking skills, they may grow up to think that buying foods that nondevotees have prepared is a necessity.

In the temple, devotees follow a strict schedule for offering meals to the Deities. At home there can be some leniency, but a schedule of offerings reminds us we are cooking for the pleasure of Krsna, rather than simply for our own hunger and desire. Can children wait to eat until after an offering? Yes, if we feed them at reasonably regulated times, from when they first

start to eat solid food, and make sure meals are both sufficient and frequent enough for their needs. "Wait until Krsna eats!" should be exciting, a spiritual game, rather than an austerity.

As we bow before Krsna's picture or Deity and ask Him to accept our offering, even our toddlers can bow next to us. By age ten or so, a child can learn the standard prayers and offer food without adult help.

We should also show our children how to offer food when away from home. Many devotees carry small pictures of Krsna and their spiritual master and can set up a simple "altar" almost anywhere.

Being away from home or a temple is one of the most difficult times for sticking to a *prasadam* diet. We adults may be willing to wait until we get home and cook. But children on an unexpectedly long shopping trip may feel that avoiding all but properly cooked and offered food is impossible. Sometimes we can bring *prasadam* with us, but other times we are caught unprepared. At such times, we may be able to buy fruit and make a simple offering. If we absolutely must buy prepared foods, we should strictly avoid grains that nondevotees have cooked. Lord Krsna in His form as Lord Caitanya has told us that such foods make the mind wicked. A devotee must strive to keep the mind pure, so that it will be a suitable place for thoughts about Krsna.

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