

The Commonsense Diet

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Stop Overthinking, Start Eating

Rujuta Diwekar

 juggernaut

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*For you Bebo,
And to your patience and wisdom, dear Chiki.*

Contents

<i>Foreword by Kareena Kapoor Khan</i>	ix
Introduction	1
Section 1: Diets Don't Work	15
1. 'Sciency' diets	25
1.1 Playing with nutrients – high protein, low carb, etc.	25
1.2 Playing with calories – intermittent fasting, skipping meals, etc.	48
1.3 Playing with single ingredients – sugar, dairy, gluten, etc.	65
2. Pseudo-cultural trends	75
2.1 Gut cleanses/detox	80
2.2 Fasting	86
2.3 Seeds and spices	92
2.4 Millets	96
Section 2: Ghar Ka Khaana Works	107
3. What is a successful diet?	109
4. The real meaning of <i>ghar ka khaana</i>	119

5. The three rules of eating <i>ghar ka khaana</i>	134
6. What's not <i>ghar ka khaana</i>	153
Section 3: Commonsense Eating and Living	159
7. The food plan you can depend on	161
8. Tracking progress	174
9. Diet recalls and modifications	184
In Conclusion – A full life	205
<i>Appendices</i>	211
<i>A Note on the Author</i>	223

Foreword

Rujuta and I worked together on *Tashan* and the rest, as they say, is history. It won't be wrong to say that we entirely disrupted the diet scene. *Ghar ka khaana* and bikini bod, once thought of as mutually exclusive, were being spoken about in the same breath.

But now all around me, I find people drowning in trends – from seeds to shots, keto to cleanses. Ironically, all this in the name of health. The foundation of good health, though, is habits; boring – but that is the truth. The habit of eating *ghar ka khaana*, exercising, sleeping early and minding one's own business, serve the best to those interested in health. The rest is just signing up for a longer route in the hope of a short cut.

So, while Rujuta and I started working together in 2007, the things that I have learnt from her continue to stay a part of my life and even my family's. In fact, the reason why I even worked with her was because she didn't have an extreme approach towards fitness. It was a finely calibrated one and I had no intentions of ever giving up on paratha, Sindhi curry and now the pasta that Saif cooks when he's in the mood.

Basically, I come from a line of women who respect and celebrate both food and hard work. My mother would eat rice and fish curry for lunch during her shooting years. My sister,

the hardest working girl I know, really knows how to eat. So thankfully, I never saw food as the enemy of fitting into good clothes, having good skin, etc., but rather an accomplice that enables those goals.

Today I have taken on many new roles – producer, homemaker, mother and wife; so I have new appreciation for food. It's not something that helps me with just my waistline but with my bandwidth to pursue it all without running out of fuel. I want to take in the full joy of my boys running in school races, of giving the perfect shot on a film set, of hedging my bets on the best script.

And while I am married to my co-actor from *Tashan*, I am not married to the way I looked in the film. Our bodies, work and relationships, must evolve and stand the test of time. Looking exactly like the way one looked 10 or 20 or 30 years ago is stagnating, not stunning.

An old piece of furniture fades, and pages of an old book, pale. That's where, as Saif says, the beauty lies. In the age and the authenticity it carries with it. To me, health is just that, an act of liberating ourselves from external pretenses. In embracing our age, our bodies, with the flaws, fine lines, hell – even a bit of a paunch. And in surrounding ourselves with people who see us worthy of good food, good roles and good holidays.

Life, after all, is about coming of age. It's about knowing that true joy lies in a hot bowl of khichdi eaten with a crunchy papad while watching your husband read aloud to the boys at bedtime. Looking good is about savouring small joys in real time and not about how thin you looked in reels.

Kareena Kapoor Khan
Mumbai

Introduction

It was 2009 and just a few months after the release of my first book *Don't Lose Your Mind, Lose Your Weight*. I had finished giving a talk in Indore which had about four hundred people in the audience. I was feeling good, very good about myself. As I was making my way towards the car, a lady pulled me by my elbow and asked, '*Yeh wahi hai na, woh Kareena Kapoor wali*, don't break my head, just lose weight.'

'Haan,' I nodded, feeling even better *ke faltu mein udne ka nahi*.

The book had intrigued many people. For the first time there was a desi way to lose weight. But more importantly, Kareena Kapoor had lost weight on it, making room for the rich, glam brigade to look at ghee, khichdi, even parathas, with new eyes. *Ghar ka khaana ka* status had gotten elevated; it was now the bikini-bod diet.

I began working in 1999 officially but had been on the gym-aerobics-diet circuit since 1997–98. When I started out, only filmy people were into fitness. After all, looking a certain way mattered to them. And because of their influence, some

industrialists too had joined their ranks. But regular people weren't 'into health' the way they are now.

Today, however, everyone wants to look like a movie star. We want a flat stomach if not a six pack, a slim if not skinny body and a sharp if not a taut jawline. Social media is full of 'transformation' pics, and everyone is an expert on health and fitness. The fintech guy, the liver guy, the branding guy – everyone has health advice for you. People put their HbA1c, BMI, resting heart rate on their bio. They even pin posts of their fastest sprint, longest cycling day, heaviest dead lift, whatever.

Appearance

My partner, GP, is from UC Berkeley. One of his closest friends, who lives in the Bay Area, was visiting us. The friend worked with Lyft at the time. He was one of their most senior executives. He told us that one day he was at a meeting with the founder. After it ended, the founder had to go into another meeting so he went to change and came out with his hair ruffled, wearing a crumpled T-shirt and ill-fitting jeans. GP's friend was puzzled. 'Well, that's the "look",' the founder explained. Basically, when you are the start-up guy, the genius working in the garage with a ground-breaking idea that is scalable, etc., you'd better look it. Only then are the VCs going to loosen their purse strings.

The lesson of this story is simple: We all need to look the part, or at least that's what we are told. If it's a professional requirement, like being formally dressed when you are a doctor or a judge, etc., it's ok. But when you make an external image of an internal state of being, then you goof up. Big time. I am talking about health.

Health is not about maintaining appearances. It's not the six-pack, the weight loss, the skinny jeans or your fasting sugars, running efficiency or sleep score. It's about living a kinder, gentler life. It empowers us to live more freely, openly, fully. When people are scared or shamed into getting 'healthier', it just doesn't work. Fear and shame are the opposite of love. Love can move mountains, and you need that positive force in your life, because building health and staying healthy is a job for a lifetime. This means that it is about monotonous, repetitive, routine habits that you do with a fresh perspective, daily. And you can have that kind of commitment only when there is love.

They say Sachin Tendulkar would be the first one to show up at the nets to practise. His seniority or the stardom he enjoyed or how much he scored in the previous match didn't matter. That's how you get a hundred 100s – keep your head down and bat.

That's also what the legendary basketball player Michael Jordan had said – it's all about practice. If you practice every

day, when you get to the moment, you don't have to think about it. Things happen instinctively. It's the same for your health. It will come through like a class act when it really matters, but the everyday practice of it means doing the same old boring stuff, day in, day out.

What's health anyway?

One of my favourite quotes about health comes from the great yoga guru B.K.S. Iyengar. 'Health is where you forget about your body.' I once heard a story that elaborated on this idea. It was 2005. I was sitting on the banks of the Ganga in Rishikesh, listening to Swami Dayananda Saraswati speak. I tend to find *bhashans* too preachy, and the ones that come from swamis can also be very boring. But that day, Swami Dayananda made all of us in the audience laugh and nod in amusement and recognition. I guess this is what it means to be a good speaker: one who knows how to connect. He simplified what others mystified.

Swamiji was talking about meditation, and he acted out the stereotype we all have about it. He closed his eyes, did a mudra with his hands and inhaled and exhaled loudly. The crowd giggled. Rishikesh is full of banners depicting meditation like this – three- to thirty-day courses are available, and even come with a certificate. Meditation, he said, is not what you can see outside but what is happening inside. It isn't what the world sees about you but what you see about the world.

He told us a story. One day he was at Haridwar station, taking a train to Delhi. The station was bustling and noisy, but he saw a young woman sleeping on the platform with a baby beside her, undisturbed by the commotion. She had covered her face with her saree pallu to keep the flies away. One hand was bent over her forehead, the other hand she placed on her infant's tummy. After a while her baby woke up and moved; the woman turned towards the baby's side, pallu still covering her face, eyes still closed.

The baby got on all fours and crawled a bit. His mother didn't move. Emboldened, he took some more steps away from her. Then, with eyes still closed, she stretched out her hand and pulled the baby back. This happened a couple of times, and soon enough the baby learnt where he could crawl out to without risking being pulled back.

This woman, Swamiji said, should be your meditation teacher. Not some old, saffron-clad, bearded man, he added, referring to himself. Learning to do your duties without being disturbed by the commotion outside, letting your thoughts know where they can go and pulling them back every time they wandered beyond the *seema*, the boundary – this was meditation.

Meditation is for everyone, whether you are a young mother, a coder, a householder, a mathematician. It is an inner state. It's about forgetting that you have a child and taking a nap, but not letting the child forget that it has a parent. It's about not forgetting your true essence, your *astitva*, your true being. Meditation is about being at ease.

It's a lesson I feel is valid for health, too. It's about being at ease with the body, or being in the state where you forget about the body. And yet the body knows that it will get pulled back if it does wander. It's about being at ease with the changes it goes through, the food we eat, the life we lead. It's less about the displays outside, whether it's counting steps in the day or our heart rate in the night, and more about not losing *din ka chain* and *raat ki neend*. Our life will have its ups and downs, but there is no need to lose that sense of ease with oneself. 'Babumoshai, *zindagi badi honi chahiye, lambi nahi*,' said Rajesh Khanna to Amitabh Bachchan in the movie *Anand*.

In a *badi zindagi*, it's about knowing that if one's weight, HbA1c, BP or cholesterol climbs a bit, then before running after the numbers you do the first things first. Turn to your side and stretch your hand to pull them back. A healthy person knows that you can forget the numbers, but they should not forget that you are watching them.

So, what does this mean in real life? It's about being less conflicted about food choices, to begin with. Eating correctly is pretty commonsensical and not half as complicated as it's made out to be. Before people try the basics – eating more at home, ordering less from outside, making exercise a part of life, sleeping on time – they download apps, programs and hire professionals who run them out of the money, confidence and bandwidth needed to lead a normal life.

We seem to have forgotten that between doing nothing and chasing weight loss or health as a life goal, there lies a state

where just being aware or watchful about food, exercise and sleep could reap excellent results. That's the state where you can watch over the child, nap, stop flies from sitting on your face and still not miss the train. A state where you could literally do it all, optimally. Because an optimum life is one where health and happiness is default and not goals to be chased.

Happy weight

Post three babies, my editor, now in her late forties, said to me that she only follows what I say (credit *toh mein bohut logo ke* good shape and good looks *ka khati hu*). So she lost all her weight after the baby. 'Very good, Chiki,' I said to her, 'And you look fab.'

'Thanks, but now I am 60 kg. You know, all my life I have been 54 kg but now I don't stress about it. I call this my happy weight. The weight I keep while I exercise, eat all my food, have a drink here and there, and manage work and kids.'

'Chiki, our bodies change, there's no such thing as "all my life",' I told her. 'This is life too. With two kids, one husband, one start-up, staff, work, an office to look after, yoga to do, authors to chase, deals to crack – for all you know 54 kg was just your "happy weight" for the last decade. If you had been strict then, maybe you would have been 48 kg at the time. But then you would have been so uptight and stressed about keeping that weight that you wouldn't have built half the life you have now.'

The thing is that at 58 kg or 53 kg (or 65 or 60, 85 or 82), we look pretty much the same – in good shape, and even fit. There is nothing to be achieved by going 5 kg under at all costs. But there is a lot to lose – sanity, focus and, most importantly, joy. So, the realization that the happy weight shifts every decade has to come. But even for that, you must eat right.

Transformations

Radhika came to my office all dressed up. ‘I want a selfie with you,’ she told me when I entered the room. Only thirty-five, she had been dieting since she was fifteen. ‘Two times I have done drastic transformation, once for my wedding (at nineteen), 85 to 50 kilos, and then after childbirth (at twenty-five), from 90 to under 60 kilos.’ She had been to eight famous dietitians and ten not-so-famous ones. ‘I have given good results to everyone,’ she told me proudly. *Kabhi khud pe, kabhi halat pe rona aaya*, was playing in my mind, and then she broke down.

Sniffing, she said to me, ‘I didn’t want to look like this, pointing to her running kajaal. I want to look good in the selfie.’

‘You will,’ I assured her, ‘meeting *ke baad mein lete hain* photo.’

Then she cried through the whole meeting, poor thing. ‘When I look back at my pics, I wonder why I was thinking

that I am fat,' she said mournfully. (If I had a rupee for every time I have heard this, I would beat the Ambanis at net worth). Calorie counting, step counting, low fat, low carb, detox, fasting, panchakarma, juicing, Ayurvedic cleanses and clinics, and at least eight celeb dietitians later, her weight was now in the triple digits.

And here she was, hoping for another transformation – she had signed up for my three-month program. '*Abhi body ko nahi, attitude ko transform karenge,*' I told her. '*Apne ko approach naya lena padega.* This time you do it slowly, sustainably. *Jo baat sui se ho sakti hai, wahan takwar nabin vaprenge.*'

Radhika had listed three program outcomes for herself: 1. Drastic transformation, 2. Don't like being fat, want to get thin, and 3. Get rid of my health problems and have good skin.

But what she was really looking for was something totally different. It was love, acceptance, approval. What was missing in her and in many people I work with isn't discipline, will power or consistency, but an inability to pursue fulfilment, meaning and purpose. Constantly being in the loop of dieting takes us far away from finding that real connect, purpose and joy in life. And no amount of weight loss or transformation can substitute for the real thing. The real thing is to have the fuel to live a full life. Train, baccha, nap, *sab kuchh*.