



Vegetarianism and Spirituality

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For those who are concerned with optimizing their health, vegetarianism is now being promoted by many medical doctors who claim that this diet provides optimum nutrition and guards against many diseases caused by non-vegetarian foods. When considering the vegetarian diet, most people focus on the health benefits. They may learn about the variety of vegetarian dishes that can be prepared, take nutrition lessons on how to eat a balanced diet using vegetarian foods, and study how to get protein from meat substitutes such as soy products, beans, nuts, vegetable protein, and dairy products. However, other aspects of the vegetarian diet are equally important. Along with improving our physical well-being, there exists a vital connection between our spiritual essence and the foods we eat.

Where God's Light Resides

Spirituality is not only concerned with our own inner development but is a way of living in which we have love and concern for all life in creation. Spirituality involves bringing us closer to our true nature, our true Self, which is one with God.

God created this universe, the earth, and its creatures. Thus, it is natural for us to respect all life rather than destroy what God has created. Those who are truly connected with God feel a love for all creatures, great and small. They perceive the Light of God in human beings and in all other life forms. This Light exists as much in the humble ant as in the powerful lion. It shines in the snake as well as the cow. It shimmers in the fish, as well as the birds. When we look at life through the eyes of the soul, we witness God in even the humblest and

most grotesque of creatures. With that angle of vision we develop love for all that exists.

There is a story told about Sain, a saint from India, who once was preparing his meal of flat bread, called chapatis. A dog entered his room and snatched the chapati he had made and ran out. Sain ran after the dog as onlookers observed. "Look at him chasing that dog over a mere chapati," they remarked. But the crowd was amazed and ashamed of their thoughts about Sain when they heard him cry out, "Wait. Let me butter the bread for you as well!" To Sain, the dog had come to his home like the best of guests, and just as you would naturally serve your guest with a chapati that was buttered, so too did he wish to treat his dog as a guest in the most hospitable manner.

The soul recognizes God in all living creatures and would never dream of taking the life of any of God's children. When we look at life through the consciousness of the empowered soul, we begin to live in a gentler manner and start respecting all forms of life. This is one of the reasons that many people who are in touch with their soul turn to a vegetarian diet. They feel that God has provided enough food in the form of plants to sustain them, and it is not necessary to take the life of any of the Lord's creatures for food.

A Diet that Complements one's Spiritual Life

For those who pursue spirituality, vegetarianism is an extension of their spiritual practices. Vegetarianism is the most compassionate diet because it involves eating food containing the least amount of consciousness or life, such as plants. Spiritual teachers often state that vegetarianism is necessary for those who want to find God. For those who wish to follow the path leading to self-knowledge and God-realization, a strict vegetarian diet is essential.

Over centuries, many religious founders and mystics recommended or required vegetarianism. Some early Greek philosophers were vegetarians. In the Holy Bible, God says, "I have given you every herb-bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree-yielding seed;

to you it shall be for meat” (Genesis1:29). Even when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, vegetarianism was implied. If we follow the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13), it is naturally out of the question to eat meat, fish, fowl, or eggs. How can we claim to be lovers of God, lovers of God’s creation, if we kill the humbler members of God’s family?

Jesus Christ was the embodiment of nonviolence. He taught, “Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:39). Do we believe that it was possible for someone who was so nonviolent as to avoid retaliation when struck by someone to be violent to God’s lower creatures? Christ taught universal love and total nonviolence. He wanted people to have love for all.

Vegetarianism is a part of the Hindu religious tradition. Buddha, the Compassionate One, taught nonviolence towards all creatures, and originally his followers were vegetarians. Mahavira, the founder of the Jain religion, preached a strict vegetarian diet. The great Sufi saints of the past were vegetarians.

At Sikh Gurdwaras (temples) no meat is served in the free kitchen, and when the Sikhs observe a religious ceremony in their homes, vegetarian meals are served after the recitation of the scriptures. A Mughal historian significantly has recorded in his book Dabistan-e-Mazahib (School of Religions) that Guru Arjan Dev made a special proclamation: “Eating of meat is forbidden among those who follow Guru Nanak.” Instructions to disciples given by the Sixth Sikh Guru Har Gobind are quite explicit: “Do not go near fish and meat.” These instructions were sent out in a circular called “Hukamnama” and are preserved at Patna Saheb Gurdwara.

Many great philosophers, artists, poets, writers, and some of the most enlightened rulers have been vegetarians as well. The great artist, Leonardo da Vinci, was a vegetarian who had great compassion. Whenever he saw a caged bird, he would pay the owner for the cage and the bird. Then he would open the cage door and watch the joyful bird soar to freedom. Ashoka the Great, Em-

peror Akbar, Sir Isaac Newton, Mahatma Gandhi, and Albert Schweitzer are just a few examples of great philosophers and world leaders who inspired others to adopt a path of nonviolence towards all creation.

The Scientific Equation

Why would so many spiritual Masters, founders of different religions, mystics, philosophers, and thinkers from different time periods all agree that a vegetarian diet is necessary for spiritual advancement? One of the reasons correlates with a law of science, called action and reaction.

One of the laws of physics states that every action has a reaction. Most people think of this law as only having to do with physical matter or energy. Saints and mystics have taught, however, that our thoughts are potent. What we think about carries an effect. Thoughts cause actions, which result in a reaction. Many religions speak of a law which states that all the good we do is returned to us and all the bad or negative things we do, say, or think come back also but as a negative reaction. Most religions believe that we are accountable for everything we think, say, and do. Whether we call it the law of karma, or action and reaction, or just believe that all the good we do comes back to us and all the bad we do must be paid for, there is an almost universal belief in some system of accountability.

In this light, let us turn to an examination of the near-death experience, to the accounts of those who have undergone clinical death and were revived by doctors. The reports of these experiences are striking in their similarity. According to a poll taken in 1991, twelve million people reported having an NDE. Early books by Dr. Raymond Moody, and later by Dr. Melvin Morse, who visited me at the Science of Spirituality Meditation Center a few years ago, describe a repeated pattern of experiences. While the patients' body had clinically died, they experienced rising above their body. They perceived doctors trying to revive their body, and then they traveled through a tunnel and emerged in a world of light. There they saw a light brighter than any in this world, but it

was not scorching. They also were met and embraced by a being of light who poured into them more love than they had ever experienced from anyone on earth. This being of light often took them on a life review in which they saw all the good that they had done and all the bad that they had done.

What was significant about this life review was that, as they viewed this three-dimensional rerun of their life, they also experienced with great intensity the reactions of the other people to their own actions. When a person having an NDE witnessed in their past an occasion of being loving and kind to someone else, he or she would also experience within themselves that love and kindness that the other person experienced. When a person having an NDE witnessed in their past an occasion of having hurt someone, he or she would then also experience within themselves all the hurt they had caused that other person. The intensity of experiencing the pain they had done to others transformed them. It made them realize that everything that we do here matters. They also learned that what matters most in our worldly life is love. All the love and kind things we do come back to us, and all the painful and hurtful things we do also come back to us. When these people who had NDE's were revived and their soul returned to the body, they changed dramatically. Most of them decided to become more loving people and not to hurt others because they realized the effect of being negative.

It is a natural deduction to realize that if we must undergo suffering or pain for hurting others in thought, word, or deed, then what is the risk we take when we cause the death of another, including any lower creatures? This law of reaction for our actions forms the basis of the teachings of the saints, Masters, and religious founders of various religions. We can understand now why Buddha, Mahavira, Guru Nanak, Moses, the Greek philosophers, ancient Hindu sages, and other enlightened beings implored their followers to be vegetarians.

A Story from Buddhism

There is a powerful teaching story from Buddhism that illustrates the basis of

the belief that a vegetarian diet is the one that those interested in spirituality should adopt. This story regarding the importance of the vegetarian lifestyle comes from the Jataka Tales of the Buddhist tradition.

In ancient times, some groups of people were in the habit of offering dead animals as a ritual called the “Feast to the Dead.” As the story goes, a teacher told his students, “It is time to find a goat to offer for the ‘Feast to the Dead.’ Find a goat and bring him to the river and bathe him. Then, place a garland of flowers around his neck.”

The students set out to obey the teacher’s instructions. As the students bathed and decorated the goat, the goat started laughing joyously. After a few moments it then began crying. The students were perplexed and asked the goat, “Why did you laugh and then begin to cry?”

The goat replied, “Ask me this question in front of your teacher.”

The students brought the goat to their teacher and told him what had happened. The teacher asked the goat the same question, “Why did you laugh and then cry?”

The goat explained, “In one of my past lives I was a teacher like yourself. I also wanted to offer a ‘Feast to the Dead,’ so I killed a goat. As a result of killing that one goat, I had to be reborn and killed five hundred times by having my head cut off, just as I had done to the goat. This is my five hundredth and last birth. I laughed out of joy that after this day I shall be freed from that one bad deed I had done.”

The teacher then asked him to explain, “But what made you cry?”

The goat replied, “I cried because I am now worried about you! When I thought about how, after you kill me, you will also have to be killed five hundred times in your future lives, I cried because I felt sorry for you.”

The teacher worried about this impending doom, and reassured the goat, “Do

not worry. I will not kill you.”

The goat explained, “It does not matter. Whether you kill me or not, I am supposed to die today.” The teacher insisted that he would protect the goat, but the goat told him, “Protection cannot save me. I cannot escape the payment for my deeds.” The teacher then ordered his students to follow the goat wherever he went, making sure nothing would harm him.

As the day wore on, the goat became hungry. The goat said, “I will eat some leaves from the bush growing beneath that rock.” As he ate, a lightning bolt hit the rock, splitting it so that part of the rock fell on the goat’s neck. He was instantly killed.

The teacher, hearing of the goat’s death, turned to his students and said, “If people were aware of the payment they would have to make for their deeds, they would never injure any living creature, whether human or animal.” The students and the teacher decided not to kill any living creature anymore.

This is a powerful teaching story that helps us understand why so many religions are based on the concept of a vegetarian diet as the safest one at a spiritual level. No matter what one’s religious belief or spiritual belief, there are some underlying commonalities. Those common beliefs are that there is a creative power or force, whether called God or any other name, and that we are soul, a part of the Creator. The majority of religions also believe that animals too have consciousness or a soul, which makes them also a part of God. Thus, the spiritual basis of vegetarianism is not to take the life of any other creature. One of the principles is to not harm any living creature.

From the Life of Saint Francis of Assisi

One beautiful example of nonviolence for all creatures is reflected in the life of St. Francis of Assisi. He loved all animals. In fact, they would gather around him and not harm him when he would be lost in prayer. There is an anecdote from his life about a time when he was sitting near a lake. A fisherman who

caught a large fish passed by in his boat and offered his catch to St. Francis. The saint joyfully accepted the catch and called the fish, “Brother.” He immediately placed the fish gently back into the water, restoring its life. It is said that the fish, which was grateful to his savior, continued to swim near the place where St. Francis was sitting in prayer. The fish would not leave that area until the saint’s prayers were done and the saint had given the fish permission to leave.

St. Francis’s life was a long epic of love. He gave freely to beggars and served his fellow beings day and night. He freed wounded animals and fed them with his own hands. One day, as he was walking, he saw a man carrying two lambs on his shoulders. The animals were hanging upside down. St. Francis asked the man what he was doing with the lambs. When the man replied that he was taking them to the market for sale to the slaughterhouse, St. Francis’s heart was filled with compassion for the animals. He bartered the coat that he was wearing in exchange for the lambs and put the animals in the care of a friend with the instructions to look after the welfare of the animals and not to kill them or harm them in any way. Thus, if we wish to find God, then we need to be loving and caring to all God’s creatures. That is why a vegetarian diet forms a part of a spiritual life.

Committing to the Least Possible Destruction

God has provided human beings with an abundance of fruits, nuts, vegetables, grains, legumes, and herbs for food. We can also eat dairy products, too, which do not require killing animals. The spiritual path is one of love, compassion, and nonviolence. It is true that to live in this world, we must destroy some life; even the plants we eat and the bacteria we breathe have life. The law of karma—every action has a reaction—operates in the realm of diet, too. So the saints say that since we cannot do without food, we should choose that diet which causes the least possible pain. Plants have the least consciousness and consuming them creates the least amount of karma.

Whereas science teaches that all matter is composed of various combinations

of chemical elements of the periodic table, the ancient scriptures of the East introduce a further dimension of knowledge. They tell of a life force within the various life forms—human, animal, bird, reptile, and plant. The least life force is found in the plants.

To explain this, the scriptures speak of five creative and component qualities, which are water, earth, fire, air, and ether. The human body is said to contain all five qualities, and humans are considered to be the highest and most valued in creation. The killing of one's fellow human being is regarded as the most heinous crime, and in history it has merited capital punishment. The next category is that of the quadrupeds and beasts, which have four qualities, with ether being absent, or forming a negligible portion. According to most laws, killing of an animal usually entails a penalty equal to the price of the animal in question. The third category includes birds, which have three active qualities in them—water, fire, and air. If someone kills a stray bird, the person usually goes free, and if a “protected” bird is killed, the hunter may have to pay a small penalty for it. Reptiles, worms, and insects have only two active qualities—earth and fire, as the other three qualities exist in a dormant form. The death of this species of life does not involve any penalty according to most of the laws in this world. Roots, vegetables, and fruits contain only the quality of water in an active state. Thus, ethically speaking, the vegetarian or fruitarian diet is least pain producing, and by adopting it, human beings contract the least karmic debt.

Recognizing the need to keep our bodies going while keeping in view the goal of nonviolence, we should follow the vegetarian diet because it results in the least possible destruction.

Meditation and the Vegetarian Lifestyle

For those who are seeking self-knowledge and God-realization, vegetarianism offers another benefit. Those involved in spirituality find that all saints of all traditions tell us that God or the creative power can be found within. To discover our Creator and our true self as soul, we need to invert our attention.

The process recommended in each religion is through meditation or inversion. It requires sitting in silence and focusing our attention at a place where we can connect with the divinity within. To do so, we have to still our mind and gaze within to find the inner Light and Sound of God.

There is a current of Light and Sound that we find when we meditate. Spiritual Masters teach a meditation called *Surat Shabd Yoga*, or *Shabd Meditation*, in which we focus our attention within to find inner Light and Sound. The Light and Sound is already there; we just need to learn the technique of meditation to help us find it.

Meditation requires stillness. Right now our attention is focused on the outer sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations of this world. This is keeping us from tuning ourselves to the Light and Sound within. To do so, we can try an introductory technique called Jyoti meditation. You may sit in a pose most convenient, in which you can sit the longest. Close your eyes gently as you would if going to sleep. To keep the mind still, mentally repeat any name of God with which you feel comfortable. Repeat this name silently and gaze into the middle of whatever appears in front of you. If you sit for half an hour, you will begin to experience inner peace, joy and bliss.

For those who are initiated into the Mysteries of the Beyond, in their meditation they see flashes of Light, Lights of any color, or a variety of inner vistas. This requires concentration within. To be able to concentrate in meditation, we need to be calm and collected. If we eat the flesh of dead animals, our own consciousness will be affected. We know the effect that our own hormones have on our body. Just imagine how many stress hormones we are adding which were circulating in the animals, birds, or fish when they were being killed or slaughtered to be used as meat! That is all forming a part of us when we partake of it. The food we eat not only has an effect upon our physical, emotional, and mental makeup, but on our spiritual consciousness. If we are trying to lead a life of nonviolence and compassion, if we are trying to become

more serene and peaceful, if we are trying to control our mind and senses to concentrate within to find God, then we will naturally want to follow a diet that helps us achieve our goal.

When the Roman poet, Seneca, on learning of the teachings of Pythagoras, became a vegetarian, he found the change a happy one and discovered to his surprise that his “mind had grown more alert and more enlightened.” Albert Einstein, the great physicist, was so convinced of the effect that the vegetarian diet can have on our nature that he believed that, if adopted universally, it would lead to great improvement in the human condition.

If we wish to follow the path of nonviolence and love for all creation, then we will adhere to a strict vegetarian diet. In doing so, we will not only have compassion on the younger members of God’s creation, and on our fellow human beings, but we will also have compassion on our own selves.



