



Vegetarianism and Spirituality

by Sant Rajinder Singh Ji Maharaj

When we think about a vegetarian diet, we often connect it with the health of our physical body. 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. What, then, is the relationship of vegetarianism to spirituality? As spirituality relates to the spirit, then what connection would our spiritual essence have to the foods we eat?

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Today, I want to explore the spiritual aspect of the vegetarian diet. Most people focus on the health benefits of vegetarianism. They may learn about the variety of vegetarian dishes that could be prepared. People may take nutrition lessons on how to eat a balanced diet using vegetarian foods. They may study how we can get the protein we need from meat substitutes such as soy products, beans, nuts, vegetable protein, dairy products, and other vegetarian foods.

There are other aspects of the vegetarian diet that are equally important. Along with improving our physical well-being, there are other benefits to vegetarianism to help our mind and soul. Spirituality is not only concerned with our own inner development. It is a way of living in which we also have love and concern for all other life in creation. Spirituality involves bringing us closer to our true nature. Our true self is one with God. When God has created this universe, the earth, and all creatures, it is natural that we want 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. The Light of God we recognize in others is also within all other life forms. It is as much in the humble ant as it is in the powerful lion. It is in the snake, as it is in the cow. It is in the fish, as it is in 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.

Sain, a saint from India, 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 him 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 to the dog, "Wait. Let me put butter on your 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 guest in a 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.

Spirituality, then, means having concern and compassion for others. There is great disparity in food resources amongst people around the world. Some countries have abundant food supplies, while others do not. A vegetarian diet may give an economic advantage to many poor countries. As Sant Darshan Singh Ji Maharaj has written, "It takes ten acres of pastureland to produce a certain amount of meat protein, but the same amount of vegetable protein can be produced on only one acre of land. So nine acres of land are wasted when meat is produced." When combating world hunger, such an equation cannot be overlooked.

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.

Why would so many spiritual Masters, founders of different religions, mystics, philosophers, and thinkers from different time periods all agree that a vegetarian diet was necessary for spiritual advancement? One of the reasons correlates with a law of science, called action and reaction. One of the laws of physics is that every action has a reaction. Most people think of this law as only having to do with physical matter or energy. There is another component which science is just beginning to uncover. We are coming to learn of the mind-body-soul connection. We are finding that our thoughts have an effect on our body. The law of action and reaction applies not only to physical matter, but also at the subtle level of thought. For example, we know that stress causes a release of hormones through our body that requires us to take action. That action may be running and fleeing from danger, or protecting ourselves in defense. Adrenaline is sent to our muscles to prepare our hands to fight or our legs to run. Due to the stress of modern life, people are getting this reaction even when not in physical danger. We may react as if we were in danger when faced with intellectual or emotional challenges as well. Thus, even our thoughts can cause a physical reaction in which a tremendous amount of stress hormones circulate through our body. The result of this excess stress is that prolonged circulation of these hormones can cause a breakdown of our body tissue. Thus, we find that people under high levels of stress may experience physical illnesses such as heart disease, circulatory problems, digestive problems, skin problems, headaches, and other stress-related ailments. So we can see the power of our thoughts on our body.

Saints and mystics have taught that our thoughts are potent. The thoughts we think and send out also have effect. Thoughts cause actions, which result in a reaction. There are many religions that speak of a law that states that all the good that we do is returned to

us and all the bad or negative things we do, say, or think comes 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 accountability system.

People who have had NDE's or near-death experiences who have undergone clinical death and were revived by doctors report similar experiences. According to a poll 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 Center a few years ago, described these experiences that were reported to them and to other doctors by patients who were revived. They described a repeated pattern of experiences. While their body had clinically died, they experienced rising above the body. They began by seeing their body below as people worked on their body. Then they went 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 does matter. 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.

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 to bathe him. Then place a garland of flowers around his neck.” The students set out to find the goat, take it to the river, and 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, except one, 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 said, “I cried because I am now worried about you! When I thought about how when 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, while the goat told him, “Protection cannot save me. I cannot escape the payment for my deeds.” The teacher 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 by the top of that rock.” The goat climbed to the top of the rock. As he ate, a lightning bolt

hit the rock. Part of the rock split off and 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 is 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.

One beautiful example of nonviolence for all creatures is reflected in the life of Saint 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 the life of St. Francis. Once 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 prayer was 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.

If we truly believe that we are one world, then all its members are our family, whether human beings or animals. Then we will love

and serve everyone as if they were our family members. In this way, we can contribute to a world of peace and love.

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.

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 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 static and noise is keeping us from attuning ourselves to the Light and Sound within. A technique of meditation to help us find the divinity within is called *Shabd Meditation*.

To get an idea of how simple the technique is we have an introductory meditation called *Jyoti Meditation*. In this you sit in a pose most convenient, in which you can sit the longest. Close your eyes gently as you would if going to sleep. Fix your gaze in front of you. To keep the mind still, repeat any Name of God with which you feel comfortable, mentally and not out loud. By gazing into the middle of whatever appears in front, you may experience bliss, peace, and joy.

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, learned of Pythagoras's teachings, he became a vegetarian. He was glad to discover, to his amazement, that his "mind had grown more alert and more enlightened."

We can see the multiple benefits of vegetarianism. Whether one tries this diet for physical health, for improved intellect and mental well-being, or for spiritual growth, one finds benefits.



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