

Vegetarianism and Theosophy

Most of us eat unconsciously. That is, apart from a distaste for broccoli or a passion for chocolate, we are not aware of why we eat what we do. We simply follow the customs of our culture. So in most Western countries, horses, dogs, and worms are not eaten, though they are in other lands. Jews and Muslims do not eat pork; Hindus do not eat eggs; Pythagoreans did not eat beans.

Doing something without knowing why we do it is to be only semiconscious and therefore only partly human. One of the great teachers said that for them intention is everything. To understand what we do, we must know why we do it. That applies to everything in life, even to something like eating that may otherwise seem trivially unimportant.

Why Vegetarianism?

Vegetarians have several different motives for not eating animal flesh. Some are motivated by considerations of health; others are concerned for the ecology of the Earth; and some use vegetarianism as part of a spiritual practice. Many vegetarians, however, adopt the diet for ethical or philosophical reasons. Vegetarianism, whatever its motive, is by no means a requirement for membership in the Theosophical Society. Yet many Theosophists are vegetarians, and Theosophical principles encourage this way of life.

Theosophy teaches that all life is interrelated. Long before the current interest in holism and ecology, the Wisdom Tradition pointed to a web of relations among all living things, reflecting the transcendental Unity from which all arise. This philosophical view of ultimate oneness is reflected in the Theosophical Society's first Object, which affirms the universal brotherhood of humanity, not as an ideal to strive for but as a fact in nature. Recognizing our oneness with one another and with all living beings, we see the earth and its largesse not as the property of humankind, ripe for exploitation, but rather as a trust to be cared for and used with prudence and compassion.

Another basic Theosophical teaching is that of the evolution of consciousness and spiritual awareness as well as of physical form. We have evolved from the animal kingdom, which is obviously close to the human in physical development, particularly the other mammals. A wish not to harm life forms that are like us naturally results from a recognition of our relationship with them. Knowing that animals are related to us and are like us, the question becomes, as philosopher Jeremy Bentham put it, "not can they *reason*, nor can they *talk*, but can they *suffer*?"

Vegetarianism around the World

Certain religious groups require or recommend a meatless diet for their members. In Christianity, for example, such groups range from Roman Catholicism's Trappist monks to the Protestant denomination of Seventh Day Adventists. Periods of abstinence from meat—for example, during Lent—are also found in a variety of faiths.

Some religions, particularly such Eastern paths as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, put such emphasis on vegetarianism that it might almost be considered a tenet of those faiths. Their advocacy of vegetarianism is based on the concept of *ahimsa*. That Sanskrit word translates literally as “nonharming,” but in practice it denotes much more. It is the Eastern equivalent of the Judeo-Christian commandment “Thou shalt not kill” or of the Golden Rule for treating others (in this case, animal others) as one would want to be treated. It is an affirmation of Albert Schweitzer's “reverence for life.”

Many religions also emphasize the sanctity of the physical body as a “temple of the living God,” whose health and well-being we are responsible to maintain. If we are seeking to follow a potentially arduous spiritual path, we especially need a strong, healthy body. Physical health is necessary to full emotional, mental, and spiritual health. We are a whole, all of whose aspects affect one another. The ancient motto, “mens sana in corpore sano” (a sound mind in a sound body) is a requirement for a life of active service.

Science and Vegetarianism

There is substantial scientific evidence attesting the healthfulness of a well-chosen vegetarian diet. Lower incidence of arteriosclerosis, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and certain types of cancer is consistently noted in vegetarian populations. The use of antibiotics, growth stimulants, and other drugs in the rearing of livestock, the build-up of toxic pesticide residues in animal tissue, and the transmission of diseases from the intensive farming methods of contemporary agribusiness are other reasons for avoiding flesh food. Since vegetarians usually develop at least a moderate interest in nutrition, overall mealtime choices also often improve when flesh is eliminated from the menu.

The aphorism “you are what you eat” applies on the emotional level as well as on the physical. In the yogic tradition, flesh food is considered *rajasic* or stimulating, tending to increase aggression or nervousness. According to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, first president of the Republic of India, “Our food and eating habits determine in no small measure our environs and general outlook on life”; and his mentor Mahatma Gandhi said that if we want to control our passions, we must first control our palates.

The wastefulness of animal agriculture, in the exploitation of land and resources, contributes to world hunger. Using vegetable foodstuffs directly to feed humans, rather than cycling them through animal bodies, could go far toward relieving the famine that besets large areas of the world. The eating of meat has far-reaching consequences economically and ecologically.

Practicing Vegetarianism

Although the list of famous vegetarians, from Shelley to Shaw, Tolstoy to Tagore, Heroditus and Pythagoras to Emerson and Thoreau, is impressive, the decision whether or not to eat meat is intensely personal. Just as every individual has unique talents and capabilities, each has different priorities and finds certain ideas presented in Theosophy more meaningful than others.

Vegetarianism also takes several forms. Some people abstain only from red meat; others eat no flesh but use milk products and eggs (lacto-ovo vegetarians); still others (especially Indian vegetarians) use milk products but not eggs; yet others consume no animal products at all (vegans); and a few eat only such vegetation as does not destroy the plant (fruitarians). The choice of a particular kind of vegetarian diet is a matter of individual judgment and conscience. The most important thing is that each person considers the matter carefully and arrive at a conscious decision.

Those who do feel in tune with vegetarian philosophy, however, will find it far easier to put into practice today than it was even a few years ago. There are an estimated 10 million people in the United States alone who have eliminated meat from their diets. A wealth of literature is available on the subject, including cookbooks for gourmet vegetarian food. There are vegetarian restaurants and cooking classes in many communities. Most grocery stores now have a supply of vegetarian alternatives, and experienced vegetarians are generally eager to extend their help to the novice.

Those who adopt vegetarianism generally find it an appealing diet in economy, ecology, health, and taste. It may perhaps also help them to become a bit more peaceful through following an inner urge to expand in this way the practice of ahimsa. In the words of eco-philosopher Richard Heinberg:

One of the most effective and practical single steps anyone in an industrialized country can take both to benefit the natural environment and to serve the long-term welfare of the global human population is to eat less meat.

My own opinion is that the simplest and best solution to the moral dilemmas posed by the meat industry is to become a vegetarian . . . Nearly all of the relevant medical research of the past twenty years points to the desirability of a diet low in fat and cholesterol and high in fiber. Statistically, vegetarians live longer than meat eaters, and vegetarianism need represent no nutritional

compromise. As for food enjoyment, I can report (after about twenty-five meatless years) that I find eating far more pleasurable knowing that no animal suffered and died merely to satisfy my conditioned carnivorism. [*New Covenant* 194]

For Further Reading

The following Quest Books are available from bookstores and the Theosophical Publishing House (1-800-669-9425).

- *The Boundless Circle: Caring for Creatures and Creation*, by Michael W. Fox.
- *A New Covenant with Nature*, by Richard Heinberg.

The following cookbooks are widely available:

- *Moosewood Cookbook*, by Mollie Katzen.
- *New Recipes from Moosewood Restaurant*, by the Moosewood Collective.
- *The Vegetarian Epicure*, by Anna Thomas
- *The "Vegetarian Times" Cookbook*, by the Editors of *Vegetarian Times*

For more information about vegetarianism, contact the Vegetarian Resource Group at www.vrg.org.