

Vegetarianism

While religions around the world share a quest for spirituality, they vary in their perception that respecting all forms of life is integral to that quest. In the following discussion, we focus on the subject of compassion as it is practiced by the adherents of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism -- and reflected in their choice to eat meat, or not.

Over the ages and around the world, Hindus have followed a variety of diets predicated on geography and socio-economic status. Traditionally, Hindus have been largely following a vegetarianism lifestyle though modern Hindus living in the West eat more meat than ever before, no follower of this oldest of world religions will ever deny that vegetarianism promotes a spiritual life and that non-violence and non-injury and showing compassion to our fellow beings is most important for a sustainable future as we cannot exist without plants, animals, water and all the other components that are necessary for life on our fragile planet.

Hinduism and Vegetarianism

Hindus comprise the great majority of the world's vegetarians

The vast diversity of Hinduism's multifaceted culture shines like gold in the variety of its numerous foods--both vegetarian and not. Geography, occupation, class and economic status play a significant role in determining the diets of modern-day Hindus, so does dedicated religious commitment.

Hindus are unmatched in their development of the art of enjoyable eating for healthy living. Their vegetarian food preparations are among the most varied in the world, and their ability to create a well-rounded nutritional diet without forfeiting taste is legendary. Many Westerners, inspired to be vegetarian but thinking a meatless diet might be boring or nutritionally lacking, derive renewed encouragement and inspiration from the many time-tested vegetarian traditions of India. One source of such wholesome eating dates back thousands of years to the health-care system of Ayurveda, the "science of long life, "which utilizes food both as medicine and sustenance.

India's cooking traditions vary greatly from North to South. One typical South Indian vegetarian meal might consist of an ample portion of rice centered on a banana-leaf plate, surrounded by small servings of vegetables prepared as curries, pickles and chutneys. This tasty assortment would be enhanced with soupy sambars and rasam, a few jaggery sweets on the side and a small portion of yogurt to balance the tastes and soothe digestion at the end of the entire meal.

Setting aside extenuating circumstances, most good Hindus would choose to follow a vegetarian way of life. All Hindu scriptures extol nonviolence and a meatless diet as being crucially important in the successful practice of worship and yoga. Most Hindu monastic orders are vegetarian. For centuries, Hindu temples and ashrams have served only vegetarian food. "Hindu dharma generally recommends vegetarianism, " notes Vedacharya Vamadeva Shastri, "but it is not a requirement to be a Hindu."

The earliest scriptural texts show that vegetarianism has always been common throughout India. In the Mahabharata, the great warrior Bhishma explains to Yudhisthira, eldest of the Pandava princes, that the meat of animals is like the flesh of one's own son, and that the foolish person

who eats meat must be considered the vilest of human beings. The Manusmriti declares that one should "refrain from eating all kinds of meat " for such eating involves killing and leads to karmic bondage (bandha). The Yajur Veda states, "You must not use your God-given body for killing God's creatures, whether they are human, animal or whatever." The Atharva Veda proclaims, "Those noble souls who practice meditation and other yogic ways, who are ever careful about all beings, who protect all animals, are committed to spiritual practices."

Over 2,000 years ago, Saint Tiruvalluvar wrote in the Tirukural (verse 251): "How can he practice true compassion who eats the flesh of an animal to fatten his own flesh?" and "Greater than a thousand ghee offerings consumed in sacrificial fires is to not sacrifice and consume any living creature." (verse 259)

Vegetarianism, called Shakahara in Sanskrit, is an essential virtue in Hindu thought and practice. It is rooted in the spiritual aspiration to maintain a balanced state of mind and body. Hindus also believe that eating meat is not only detrimental to one's spiritual life, but also harmful to one's health and the environment.

Most Hindus strive to live in the consciousness that their choice of foods bears consequences, according to the law of karma. Even the word "meat, " mamsa, implies the karmic law of cause and effect. Mam means "me " and sa means "he, " intimating that the giver of pain will be the receiver of that same pain in equal measure.

Historically, while a large portion of ancient Hindu society lived predominantly on a vegetarian diet for religious reasons, certain communities, like Kshatriyas (the Hindu warrior class), consumed at least some meat and fish. Hindu royalty also ate meat. Nomadic Hindus, who did not farm, had to rely on animal flesh for food, because nothing else was available. Agricultural communities were among the best examples of Hindu vegetarianism, for they were not inclined to kill and eat the animals they needed for labor.

All animals are sacred to Hindus, but one stands out among all the rest--the cow. According to an ancient Hindu story, the original cow, Mother Surabhi, was one of the treasures churned from the cosmic ocean. The five products of the cow (Pancha-gavya)--milk, curd, ghee, urine and dung--are considered sacramental.

Although no temples have ever been constructed to honor the cow, she is respected as one of the seven mothers--alongside the Earth, one's natural mother, a midwife, the wife of a guru, the wife of a brahman and the wife of the king.

Vedic offerings primarily consisted of plant and dairy products, such as ghee, honey, soma (an intoxicating plant juice), milk, yogurt and grain.

They who are ignorant, though wicked and haughty, kill animals without feelings or remorse or fear of punishment. In their next lives, such sinful persons will be eaten by the same creatures they have killed. Shrimad Bhagavatam, (11.5.14)

Jainism and Vegetarianism

The virtuous compassion of the Jain lifestyle yields exemplary vegetarians

All Jains are vegetarians, for they believe that no living entity should be harmed or killed, especially for food.

According to one famous Jain motto: "All living creatures must help each other." From its inception 2,600 years ago, Jainism has remained faithful in its commitment to nonviolence and vegetarianism.

Because followers of this gentle religion make compassion the central focus of their lives, their understanding and practice of ahimsa exceeds even that of many of the followers of other Eastern religions. Jains believe that humans, animals and plants are all sacred and can feel pain. Hence, they are careful to avoid harming even plants.

The concept of ahimsa, non-injury, permeates all aspects of Jain life. Some ascetics of this faith will sweep insects from their path as they walk and wear a face mask to prevent inadvertently killing small organisms as they breathe. Traditionally, these kindly souls adhere to the ideals of nonviolence with regard to the jobs they take to make a living. Often, they will work as traders of commodities. Even here, they follow rules. They will never handle goods made with animal products, such as hides, horns, ivory and silk. Farming and defending one's nation are allowed as exceptions to the rule.

Jains classify the life-quality of all living entities according to the number of senses they possess. The lowest forms of life have only one sense: touch. This group includes plants. The highest life forms--including humans and most animals--have all five senses: touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing. The earthworm is an example of a life form with only two senses: touch and taste. Lice have three: touch, taste and smell. Mosquitoes have four: touch, taste, smell and sight. Jains consume only plants, because plants have just one sense.

Jains have extensive dietary rules regarding the choice and preparation of the plants they eat. Generally, vegetables that grow underground are prohibited, because harvesting them usually means pulling them up by their roots, which destroys the entire plant, as well as all the microorganisms living around its roots. When possible, fruits are plucked only when they are ripe and ready to fall to the ground. Ideally, these are harvested after they have fallen of their own accord.

Grains, such as wheat, rice and beans, are collected only when the pods are dry and dead. Very orthodox Jains will not eat certain fruits and vegetables that contain a lot of seeds--like eggplant and guava--because these so often contain worms. Cauliflower, broccoli and other vegetables with velvety surfaces are also avoided by orthodox Jains because tiny insects get stuck on their surfaces and cannot be removed. Mushrooms are not consumed because they may contain parasites. Leafy vegetables, like cabbage and spinach, are carefully washed and inspected for insects and worms. Dairy products are allowed.

Jains follow restrictions on the timing of food preparation and its consumption. Meals must be cooked and eaten only during daylight hours. This rule evolved because cooking food at night could cause the death of small flying creatures like gnats and mosquitoes that would be attracted to the light and warmth of a fire.

Jains perform several kinds of fasts, including during festivals and on the eighth and fourteenth day of the full moon cycle. While fasting, only foods prepared from grains are allowed, and no

fruits or vegetables are consumed. Besides protection of other living beings, the primary purpose of the Jains' dietary codes is to control desire and purify mind and body. In addition, their practices provide health and environmental benefits and help to conserve world resources. At a world environmental congress recently held in England, a comparative study of religions proclaimed Jainism the most environmentally friendly religion on Earth.

The lifestyle of modern Jain monks and nuns is more austere than that of even the strictest lay Jains. In their respect for Mahavira, Jainism's founder, monks of the Digambar (sky-clad) sect wear no clothes, shave their heads and walk barefoot. They eat only once a day, and then only what is offered to them as a sacrament.

Today there are roughly five million Jains worldwide, with the most orthodox residing in India. Although many modern Jains modify their dietary restrictions for convenience, most are faithful vegetarians. Some have entered non-traditional professions. A select few have migrated to foreign countries and have become some of the wealthiest Indians in the world.