



The Vegetarian Way of Life

by Sant Darshan Singh Ji Maharaj

The principles of spirituality have remained the same throughout the ages. Modern science is only now coming to the conclusions that the saints and mystics have realized from time immemorial. In the realm of nutrition too, modern research is confirming the supremacy of the diet followed by those leading a spiritual life - the vegetarian diet. In all respects - spiritual, moral, and physical - the vegetarian diet is the most suitable for man. And for those who wish to follow the path leading to self-knowledge and God-realization, a strict vegetarian diet is essential.

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If we examine various religious and mystic traditions, we find that they recommend or require vegetarianism. Such a diet is associated with the earliest religious traditions. Thus, Pythagoras and his followers were strict vegetarians. The Greek sage taught: "My friends, do not defile your bodies by partaking of impure foods. We have enough of grains and trees which are loaded with fruits. We have delicious vegetables and roots which can be readily cooked. And there is no dearth of milk and honey. Our earth has abundance of such pure and harmless foods and there is no need for us to partake of meals for which blood has to be shed and innocent life sacrificed."

Many of the famous early philosophers such as Plato, Plotinus, Empedocles, Apollonius, Plutarch, and Porphyry also followed the vegetarian diet. Again, many of the early mystery religions, such as the Orphics and the Essenes had vegetarianism as a prerequisite for initiation. If we carefully study the Holy Bible we find that God intended man to be a vegetarian. In Genesis, God says, "I have given you every herb-bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree-yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat" (Genesis 1:29). Even when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, vegetarianism was necessarily 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 His creation, if we kill the humbler members of God's family?

Jesus Christ was the Apostle of Peace; he was the embodiment of nonviolence. He taught, "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:39). If he was nonviolent to that extent, could he have been violent to the lower rungs of God's creation? Christ taught universal love and total nonviolence. He asked us not to indulge in any killing, and he commanded that we have love for all.

The great Sufi saints of the past were vegetarians. Thus, Mirdad declares, "Those who follow the spiritual path must never forget that if they partake of flesh, they must pay for it with their own flesh." 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. And, of course, vegetarianism is an integral part of the Hindu religious tradition. 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, sent out in a circular called "Hukamnama," are preserved at Patna Saheb Gurdwara.)

If you make a comparative study of religious traditions, you will find that after a saint or a Master has concluded his ministry, the esoteric side of his teachings is rapidly forgotten and is replaced by rites and rituals. To make the teachings more acceptable to a large number of people, changes are made in diet and discipline by those who come after him. But the mystic tradition is clear in advocating vegetarianism.

Many great philosophers, artists, poets, writers, and some of the most enlightened monarchs have been vegetarians as well. Ashoka the Great, Emperor Akbar, Sir Isaac Newton, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Albert Schweitzer are just a few examples. It was their sensitivity and compassion which led them to adopt the path of nonviolence towards all creation.

There is an interesting anecdote from the life of George Bernard Shaw regarding the vegetarian diet. Once when he was very ill, the doctors said that unless he started eating eggs and taking meat soup, he would die. As he was a strict vegetarian, he refused to follow the doctors' orders. When the doctors stuck to their point of view and told him they could not guarantee that he would survive the illness, G.B. Shaw called for his private secretary and in the presence of the doctors dictated his will. It said, "I solemnly declare that it is my last wish that when I am no longer a captive of this physical body, my coffin when carried to the graveyard be accompanied by mourners of the following categories: first, birds; second, sheep, lambs, and cows, and other animals of the kind; third, live fish in an aquarium. Each of these mourners should carry a placard bearing the inscription: 'O Lord, be gracious to our benefactor, G.B. Shaw, who gave his life for saving ours!' "

Leonardo da Vinci, another vegetarian, had great compassion. If 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.

God has provided man with an abundance of fruits, nuts, vegetables, grains, legumes, and herbs for food. And we can 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, the

least possible sin. An incident which I recollect will explain this rather well. Sant Kirpal Singh was in spiritual retreat in Rishikesh for several months in 1948. I spent some weeks with him. Our way of life was extremely simple there, and we used large leaves as plates for our food. One day, after I plucked the leaves for the evening meal, the Beloved Master asked me to count them. They were somewhat in excess of the number of people who were to have their food. He told me that in the future I should be more careful and count the number in our group beforehand. He said, "You have taken off two more leaves than were needed. They too have life."

While 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 - man, 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. Man's body is said to contain all five qualities, and he is considered to be the highest and most valued in creation. The killing of one's fellow man is regarded as the most heinous crime and in history it has merited capital punishment.

The next in value are 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, he usually goes scot-free, and if a "protected" bird is killed the hunter may have to pay a small penalty for it. Lesser still is the value of reptiles, worms, and insects which 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. The least value is placed on roots, vegetables, and fruits which 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, man contracts the least karmic debt. Sarmad, a seventeenth century Sufi of Jewish origin, expressed the same truth in the simplest of words: "The Light of Life, which is the Lord, is dormant in the mineral world, is in the dream-state in the vegetable world, awakens in the animal world, and comes to full consciousness in man."

A similar perspective may be found in the writings of our modern spiritual and philosophical thinkers. Teilhard de Chardin, for example, has noted in his *Phenomenon of Man*, that there are differing degrees of consciousness in living organisms, depending upon their complexity. He argues that consciousness becomes more perfected and recognizable in richer, more complex, and

more original life forms - the highest being man himself. This view would produce essentially the same dietary guidelines as do the teachings of the ancient scriptures. 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.

Many people have misunderstandings about the nutritional value of the vegetarian diet, and they think it does not give us the proper food value. The main complaint against the vegetarian diet has been that it does not provide the proper proteins. But the latest research confirms that the vegetarian diet definitely gives more than enough protein, as well as the required vitamins, minerals, and calories. I have been in touch with leading nutritionists, and their evidence shows that a balanced vegetarian diet can certainly give us all the necessary nutrients. In fact, the United States Food and Drug Administration's periodical "FDA Consumer" lauds the efficacy and practicality of the vegetarian diet. It points out that as a result of a 1974 report by the Food Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences, "The idea that vegetarians can't get what their bodies need without meat was pretty well put into the myth category."

Moreover, by abstaining from alcohol and drugs which deplete the body of valuable nutrients, vegetarians are able to maintain health and higher levels of calories, vitamins, and minerals as compared to those who partake of alcohol, drugs, and animal foods. As more and more research is conducted, scientists, biologists, and nutritionists are finding that the vegetarian diet is most wholesome and healthful for man.

The strongest animals with the greatest endurance are vegetarians. The elephant, the ox, and the horse are known for their might and capacity to work. We even measure the power of engines in "horsepower." And, to refute any claims that vegetarianism may not support the highest intellectual development, we have already mentioned that many of our greatest, most creative thinkers have been vegetarians.

Even from the physiological point of view, man is most suited to a vegetarian diet - his physical structure does not place him in the same category as meat-eating animals. For example, carnivorous animals have big cuspids, or canine teeth, as well as claws for ripping and tearing flesh; man does not. Man's teeth more closely resemble the herbivorous animals which have special flat molars for grinding. Further, the intestines of meat-eating animals are short (about three times the length of the trunk of their body) so that the flesh is absorbed or expelled before it putrefies and produces poisons. But man has very long intestines (about ten to twelve times the length of the trunk of his body).

Should we stop to think about it, we would realize that the food we eat has an effect upon our physical, emotional, and mental makeup. 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, then we will naturally want to follow a diet that helps us achieve our goal.

There is a beautiful story related by Attar which I would like to narrate. It is a story about the great Sufi lady saint Rabia Basri. Once when she had gone to the mountains, a band of wild creatures -deer, gazelle, mountain goats, and wild asses - gathered around her. They came and looked at her and drew close to her. Suddenly, Hasan-al-Basri arrived on the scene, and when he saw Rabia he approached her. The wild creatures, when they saw Hasan, all fled in terror. Hasan was vexed when he saw this. He looked at Rabia and asked, "Why did they run away in fear from me while they were friendly with you?" Rabia asked, "What have you eaten today?" He said, "Some onion, fried in fat." She said, "You eat of their fat, why should they not flee from you?"

If we too become sensitive to what we eat, our very way of life will be affected. 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."

Food can be categorized according to the effect it has upon man. In India, three broad categories of diet have been given: pure (satvik) foods, energizing (rajsik) foods, and stupefying (tamsik) foods. Pure foods include vegetables, grains, beans, legumes, fruits, and nuts, as well as milk, butter, and cheese, all in moderation. This diet produces serenity and equipoise, and it is said to keep the head and heart free from all types of impurities. The energizing foods include pepper, spices, condiments, and sour and bitter things. Foods of this type act as stimulants and excite the senses. Stupefying foods include stale foods, meat, fish, fowl, eggs, and alcoholic beverages - such a diet produces inertia. I am often asked about the rationale of not taking even infertile eggs, which some people even label as "vegetarian eggs." Apart from the fact that such an egg represents a form of life which cannot fulfill itself, it has the same undesirable effect on us as a fertile egg. It stupefies the mind and enflames the passions. Taking these factors into view, the saints and sages from time immemorial have followed the pure diet because it is most helpful for spiritual advancement.

In terms of socio-economics too, vegetarianism is the most practical diet. 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. Similarly, an animal eats sixteen

pounds of grain to produce only one pound of meat, and thus fifteen pounds of grain are wasted. God has given us the facilities and bounties of nature by which all His children can be fed. Vegetarianism is much more productive and much less wasteful. So in this regard too, the vegetarian diet is the most rational.

When a predator preys on another creature, at least he does so for his own survival; he has no other means of sustaining life. But when a man turns non-vegetarian, he can plead no such compulsion. In fact, his desire to give up the way of life natural to his species is highly wasteful and morally indefensible. If those who partake of meat were to witness the manner in which it is "manufactured" in the slaughterhouse, many of them would give it up in revulsion.

In addition to being careful about what type of food we eat, we should also be careful about how much we eat. The basic principle with regard to food is, "Eat to live, not live to eat." Unfortunately, most of us live to eat- and overeat. When we are given a new or delicious dish, we overeat. And sometimes to show someone we appreciate their hospitality, we overeat. But overeating is the cause of many of our health problems, and some of our meditation problems as well. The Persian mystic Sheikh Saadi has said that because we are filled up to our noses with food, we are not able to see the Light of God. He advised that the stomach be divided into four compartments: two for filling with simple food; one for water; while reserving one for the Light of God.

There is an instructive incident from the life of Prophet Mohammed. One day a physician came to him and offered his services for the sick and ailing in the Umat, the Prophet's following. He remained idle for six months as none of the Prophet's followers fell ill. He approached the Prophet and asked for permission to leave, as no one there required his services. Hazrat Mohammed, with a gentle smile on his lips, bid good-bye to the physician saying that so long as the congregation lived by his instructions, they would not fall sick: "Always eat a little less than what one may, in his hunger, otherwise like to take."

If we eat too much we feel sleepy and drowsy, and for those on the spiritual path, more time spent sleeping means less time for meditation. And even when we do meditate, if we overeat we may be drowsy. Once a man went to a saint and complained, "Sir, my meditations are not good." The saint replied, "Look to your stomach." Another man came to this saint and said, "I cannot control my mind." The saint replied, "Look to your stomach." A third man came and said "I am not having good health." And the saint again replied, "Look to your stomach." So eating less than we have an appetite for is good not only for our meditations but also for our health.

I often come across people for whom the question, "What is the natural diet for man?" has become such an obsession that they lose sight of the larger humane and spiritual purposes which the vegetarian diet ideally fulfills. Vegetarianism at its highest is not an end in itself, but an indispensable means to an end. Rightly understood, we should see diet not as something apart, but as an integral element of a whole philosophy, a whole way of life.

Albert Einstein, the great physicist, was so convinced of the far-reaching impact which the vegetarian way of life 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 man but we will also have compassion on our own selves.

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