



## The Vegetarian Imperative A Spiritual Perspective

By Charles Shahar

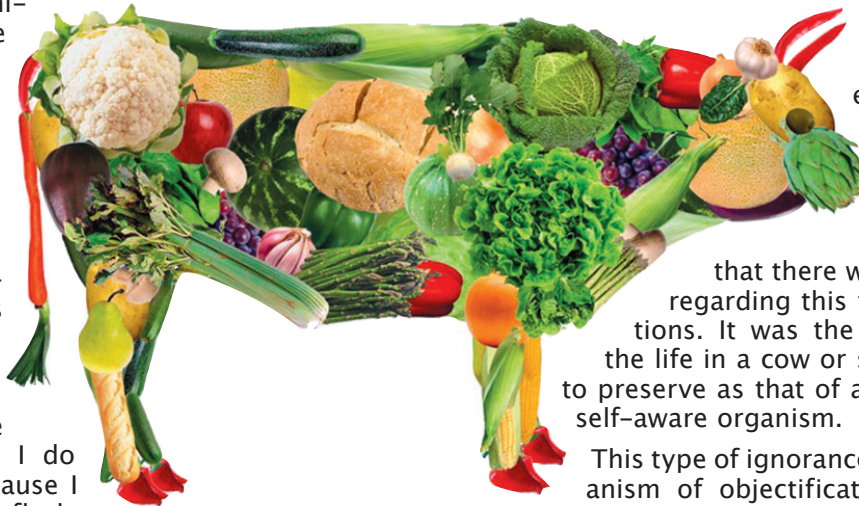
In this article, I want to approach the implications of assuming a vegetarian diet, from a spiritual perspective. While it is true that vegetarianism has benefits for the environment, and for the physical health of the individual, my attention will be on some of the more spiritual reasons for avoiding meat consumption. This kind of information may not be accessible from conventional sources that extol meat-free diets, so it may bring to light an entirely different dimension of consideration.

On a most basic level, vegetarianism is about not harming other life forms. Of course, plant-life is a life form, but I am referring to animals who generally have consciousness. There are many ways to define consciousness. We can think about it in terms of self-awareness. Any animal that tries to save itself when its existence is threatened is self-aware. It is aware of its identity as an entity that exists independently of other beings.

There are grey areas related to vegetarianism that may not fit this criterion of self-awareness. Unfertilized eggs do not possess consciousness, yet they are certainly not plant life. I do not eat eggs simply because I consider it akin to eating flesh. This is a personal choice, and there are many lacto-ovo vegetarians who feel comfortable about such a diet. Some add an extra level of justification by eating eggs that are produced only by hens allowed to roam freely.

Getting back to the concept of self-awareness, respect for life is the most fundamental of all spiritual principles. The taking of a life, the destruction of self-conscious beings, is the ultimate act of violence. All self-aware beings desperately strive to survive. They simply wish to exist. Existence is the most basic expression of individual consciousness. It is an all-or-nothing proposition: one is either alive or dead.

This principle of respecting or affirming life does not absolve those who don't kill the animals they eat. In fact, it is very likely that many more people would become vegetarians if they had to kill their meat-based food. It is also likely that people would be more sympathetic toward vegetarianism if they had to witness the actual slaughter of animals. For most consumers, there is a disconnection between what they eat, and the fact that a living being had to die in the process. They would rather not think about the suffering and destruction it entailed.



This type of denial represents a type of wilful ignorance. The individual chooses not to acknowledge the destruction that preceded the act of consumption. But it is their demand for meat-based food which creates conditions that lead to such wanton destruction of life. Killing and suffering is therefore a consequence of their meat-eating. As long as the demand continues, the slaughtering will continue as well. It is simply a question of supply and demand.

The human mind has an amazing capacity for denial. For instance, an ardent representative of Greenpeace came to my door a few years ago, asking for a contribution to save the whales across the planet. I am always supportive of such endeavours. Out of curiosity, I

asked him if he was a vegetarian. He responded that he was not, but was thinking of becoming one. I didn't pursue the matter, but it was clear to me

that there was something amiss regarding this fellow's good intentions. It was the understanding that the life in a cow or sheep is as precious to preserve as that of a whale or any other self-aware organism.

This type of ignorance involves the mechanism of objectification as well. Unless there is a perversion of consciousness, we don't like to see other beings suffer. Most of us would not kill animals to secure their meat. Interestingly, we form very strong attachments to our pets and would recoil at the prospect of killing and eating them. When we objectify other living beings, we literally see them as mere objects. It is this implicit rationalization that dictators use while persecuting and killing other human beings, and it is the rationale we give when we run laboratory experiments on chimpanzees, rats and other animals.

There is another layer of violence, which I have not mentioned, that relates to the ways such animals live out their captivity. Industrial efficiency takes precedence over the welfare and comfort of these animals. They are made to live in abhorrent conditions - in confined, overcrowded and unsanitary spaces, pumped up with drugs such as growth hormones and antibiotics, while being denied fresh air, exercise, and enjoyment. They live their lives in utter stress and misery.

For meat eaters, animals are a product for their consumption. When we consider sentient beings as mere commodities we stray far from our compassionate nature. This is ultimately a spiritual failing. Such



insensitivity reflects a deep disconnection from the life current, the subtle manifestation of the divine that connects us all.

**Prana, the Life Force**

Prana is the vital force referred to in the Hindu scriptures. Prana is everywhere: in our bodies, within our homes, throughout nature, in the food we eat. Pranic energy is considered the animating principle behind all of sentient manifestation. It is what empowers the cells of the body, initiates movement in the limbs, makes plants grow, and nurtures and sustains life in all its varieties.

Before we talk about meat and prana, let us examine the opposite end of the spectrum. Vegetables and fruits are high in pranic content, but one must still be alert when buying them in terms of their freshness. For instance, there is a noticeable decline in the quality of vegetables if they have been refrigerated for a while and have begun to grow slightly dull or rotten as a result. Compare these to the same vegetables freshly picked and with their stalks still attached.

There is a peak pranic period for fruits and vegetables when they reach maximum ripeness. At that point, their color is most vibrant, and their taste and smell are most pleasing. There is a subtle energy that will reveal a kind of effervescence that surrounds them, a sheen that makes them particularly attractive and worthy of our consumption.

Once this peak pranic period has passed, prana begins to withdraw, and the forces of decay begin to gain momentum. Bruises, discoloration and mold begin to appear. The item may taste bitter or sour and smell rancid as well. Any produce that is refrigerated over a long period of time will tend to lose much of its pranic content. The same pertains to cooked food. Overly cooked food usually means the prana has been drained almost entirely.

What does this have to do with eating meat? Of all foods, meats have the least prana, since they are comprised basically of dead and decaying material. When prana withdraws from the physical organism the latter begins to lose its cohesion and the process of decomposition takes hold. Eating meat is equivalent to ingesting material that is not only in the process of rotting, but is completely dead. The dullness in the color of meat, its odor and texture, are all signs of how lifeless it is, and indicative of the types of vibrations one absorbs into their system by ingesting it.

**Seeking Refined Vibrations**

I often hear from people who have become vegetarians how much lighter they feel, how much more energy they have, and how much more lucid their thinking is. One cannot argue with such testimonies. In fact, stopping meat-eating can be a life-changing event for someone who is committed to leading a more spiritual life. It is interesting to see how a vegetarian's sensibilities evolve with time.

For instance, after thirty years of being a vegetarian, I

cannot enter a butcher shop or pass through the meat section of a supermarket without experiencing a sense of revulsion. Most people who have been vegetarians for many years are disgusted or disturbed by the sight or smell of meat, particularly meat grilled on a barbecue. The smell in meaty restaurants is repugnant for them. In my case, it is not only a question of washing my smelly clothes after such a visit; I will always rush to take a shower afterwards, to wash out whatever gunk has stuck to my aura.

Interestingly, many people like the smell of barbecued meat. A few have complained about the smell of the fine incense I light in my meditation room, yet they enjoy the odor of grilled chicken. What accounts for such a difference in discrimination? The answer has to do with "vibrational resonance." The slower or cruder the vibrations one is immersed in, the grosser their sensibilities becomes. The opposite is also true: refined vibrations purify the subtle nervous system and raise one's awareness.

People who are constantly exposed to unrefined vibrations will become coarse themselves, at least on the level of their awareness. This is not difficult to understand. If you continually listen to very loud noises, your ears will gradually lose their sensitivity to more subtle sounds. If you are constantly eating very spicy food, your tongue will not be able to detect subtler flavors. In the same way, if you are constantly exposed to cruder energies, your sensitivity will dull to finer vibrations.

What I am trying to say may not seem politically correct, but eating meat will lower your vibrational quality, meaning it will make your awareness less refined. This may not have important implications for most people, but for those who lead a spiritual life, it will impact on their ability to raise their consciousness. Their emotions will be more involving, their mind will feel more lethargic or heavy, and their meditations will seem less profound.

For the spiritual person this is a critical point. The meat they eat, which is born out of violence, will affect their emotional and mental states. Meat-eating activates the lower chakras and stimulates the lower natures in a man or woman. More refined foods are assimilated and sublimated in ways that do not bind up spiritual energy. Instead of weighing the person down, they contribute to the lifting of the spirit and the ascension of human consciousness from its lower aspects to the divine.

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