Diaspora
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Vegetarian was for thousands of years a principle of health and spiritual ethics throughout India. Though Muslim and Christian colonization radically undermined and eroded this ideal, it remains to this day a cardinal ethic within Hindu thought and practice.

For India's ancient thinkers, life is seen as the very stuff of the Divine, an emanation of the Source and part of a cosmic continuum. They further hold that each life form, even water and trees, possesses consciousness and energy. Nonviolence, ahimsa, the primary basis of Vegetarian, has long been central to the religious traditions of India - especially Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Religion in India has consistently upheld the sanctity of life, whether human, animal or, in the case of the Jains, elemental.

The Sanskrit for Vegetarian is shakahara, and one following a Vegetarian diet is a shakahari. The term for meat-eating is mansahara, and the meat-eater is called mansahari. Ahara means "to consume, or eat," shaka means "vegetable," and mansa means "meat or flesh." The very word mansa, "meat" conveys a deep appreciation of life's sacredness and an understanding of the law of karma by which the consequence of each action returns to the older. As explained in the 2,000-year-old Manu Dharma Shastra, 5.55, "The learned declare that the meaning of mansa (flesh) is, 'he (sa) will eat me (mam) in the other world whose flesh I eat here.'"

There developed early in India an unparalleled concern for harmony among life forms, and this led to a common ethos based on noninjuriousness and a minimal consumption of natural resources - in other words, to compassion and simplicity. If homo sapiens is to survive his present predicament, he will have to rediscover these two primary ethical virtues.

"Is Vegetarian integral to noninjury?" In the contemporary sourcebook on Hinduism, Dancing with Siva, this question is directly addressed: "Hindus teach Vegetarianism as a way to live with a minimum of hurt to other beings, for to consume meat, fish, fowl or eggs is to participate indirectly in acts of cruelty and violence against the animal kingdom. The abhorrence of injury and killing of any kind leads quite naturally to a Vegetarian diet, shakahara. The meat-eater's desire for meat drives another to kill and provide that meat. The act of the butcher begins with the desire of the consumer. Meat-eating contributes to a mentality of violence, for with the chemically complex meat ingested, one absorbs the slaughtered creature's feat, pain and terror. These qualities are nourished within the meat-eater, perpetuating the cycle of cruelty and confusion. When the individual's consciousness lifts and expands, he will abhor violence and not be able to even digest the meat, fish, fowl and eggs he was formerly consuming. India's greatest saints have confirmed that one cannot eat meat and live a peaceful, harmonious life. Man's appetite for meat inflicts devastating harm on the earth itself, stripping its precious forests to make away for pastures. The Tirukural candidly states, 'How can he practice true compassion who eats the flesh of an animal to fatten his own flesh? Greater than a thousand ghee offerings consumed in sacrificial fires is not to sacrifice and consume any living creature.'"

Defining the Diet of Compassion

Today the word vegetarian retains no single common definition, but has attracted a multitude of interpretations. Some even liberally call themselves vegetarian who eat fish and fowl but abstain from meat. Others exclude both meat and dairy products. What is the traditional Hindu definition of vegetarianism? A vegetarian diet includes: grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes and dairy products. A Hindu vegetarian diet does not include meat, fish, shellfish, fowl or eggs. For good health, even certain vegetarian foods are minimized: frozen and canned foods, highly processed foods, such as white rice, white sugar and white flour; and "junk" foods and beverages - those with abundant chemical additive, such as artificial sweeteners, colorings, flavorings and preservatives. Natural, fresh foods, locally grown without insecticides or chemical fertilizers are preferred.

Many swamis, Hinduism's emminent religious leaders, who have counseled and guided the lives of their devotees and families for many years attest that vegetarian families have fewer problems than those who eat meat. When children are raised as vegetarians, every day they are exposed to non-violence as a principle of peace and compassion. Every day they are growing up, they are remembering and being reminded to not kill another creature to eat, to feed

themselves. And when they won't kill or have another creature killed to feed themselves, they will be much less likely to perform physically, mental or emotional acts of violence against people.

The Animal-Loving Voice of Scripture

Hindu scripture speaks clearly and forcefully on nonkilling and vegetarianism. The Yajur Veda summarily dictates: "Do not injure the beings living on the earth, in the air and in the water." The beautiful Tirukural, a widely-read 2,000-year-old masterpiece of ethics, speaks of conscience: "When a man realizes that meat is the butchered flesh of another creature, he must abstain from eating it." The Manu Dharma Shastra advises: "Having well considered toe origin of flesh and the cruelty of fettering and slaying of corporeal beings, let one entirely abstain from eating flesh." In the yoga-infused verses of the Tirumantiram, warning is given of how meat-eating holds the mind in gross, adharmic states: "The ignoble ones who eat flesh, death's agents bind them fast and push them quick into the fiery jaws of hell (Naraka, lower consciousness)." The roots of noninjury, nonkilling and nonconsumption of meat are found in the Vedas, agamas, Upanishads, Dharma Shastras, Tirumurai, Yoga Sutras and dozens of other sacred texts of Hinduism. Here is a select collection of some of the oldest verses that address vegetarian and the ethic of ahimsa, noninjury.

PROTECT BOTH OUR SPECIES, TWO-LEGGED AND FOUR-LEGGED. Both food and water for their needs supply. May they with us increase in stature and strength. Save us from hurt all our days, O Powers! - Rig Veda Samhita 10.37.11

THOSE NOBLE SOULS WHO PRACTICE MEDITATION AND OTHER YOGIC WAYS, who are ever careful about all beings, who protect all animals, are the ones who are actually serious about spiritual practices. - Atharva Veda Samhita 19.48.5

YOU MUST NOT USE YOUR GOD-GIVEN BODY FOR KILLING GOD'S CREATURES, whether they are human, animal or whatever. - Yajur Veda Samhita 12.32

PEACEFUL BE THE EARTH, PEACEFUL THE ETHER, PEACEFUL HEAVEN, peaceful the

waters, peaceful the herbs, peaceful the trees. May all Gods bring me peace. May there be peace through these invocations of peace. With these invocations of peace which appease everything, I render peaceful whatever here is terrible, whatever here is cruel, whatever here is sinful. Let it become auspicious, let everything beneficial to us. - Atharva Veda Samhita 10.191.4

TO THE HEAVENS BE PEACE, TO THE SKY AND THE EARTH; TO THE WATERS BE PEACE, to plants and all trees; to the Gods be peace, to Brahman be peace, to all men be peace, again and again - peace also to me! O earthen vessel, strengthen me. May all beings regard me with friendly eyes! I look upon all creatures with friendly eyes! With a friend's eye may we regard each other! - Shukla Yajur Veda Samhita 36.17-18

NO PAIN SHOULD BE CAUSED TO ANY CREATED BEING OR THING. - Devikalottara agama

AHIMSA IS NOT CAUSING PAIN TO ANY ANY LIVING BEING AT ANY TIME THROUGH THE actions of one's mind, speech or body. - Sandilya Upanishad.

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