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John Robbins' Book Explodes Diet Crisis

A modern fable: On the western seaboard of the world's richest country, a tiny business fiefdom is founded. It makes ice cream, thirty-one luscious flavors that spin children and adults dizzy over choosing. The Ice Cream fiefdom establishes colonies all over the land and becomes fabulously successful. The king of the fiefdom, named Irv, has a son, a prince named John, who is heir to the Irv dynasty throne. John lives in a castle with a swimming pool shaped like an ice-cream cone, and is groomed as a young man to rule the business. But, one sunny day, John, realizing that Ice Cream is no substitute for Spirit, Truth and Inner Happiness, renounces his throne and walks out of the castle to seek his soul-self in a hut in the woods of a sea-girt island. He becomes a mystic teacher and eventually writes a book on the oneness of man, beasts and earth.

This fable is true, and it continues to this day in the near-magical life of John Robbins, a wiry man with a pixyish face who sounds a bit like astronomer Carl Sagan but speaks of far deeper matters. In 1987 Robbins authored *Diet For A New America*. Many feel it is the most important expression of ahimsa-diet-environment consciousness put forward in our times. It is written with such skill and substance that it came up for a Pulitzer Prize last year. It didn't win the prize. But it is riding a tidal wave of enthusiasm toward revolutionary changes in how the American (and by extension the world) populace is viewing the consequences of what goes between its shiny white teeth. Those effects are far-reaching and at times unnerving, ranging from the viciously cruel raising of for-consumption animals and birds (culminating in their knife-edged slaughter) to health risks, deadly pesticide coatings of crops, wastage of land and water resources, deforestation, world hunger and the economic inefficiencies of eating meat.

Diet is such a damning indictment of the meat, dairy and egg industries in the US that Robbins told HINDUISM TODAY he's received death threats at his home in California. "There's massive resistance. It's coming from the meat industry more than the dairy. It is almost a religion for them-the Great American Steak religion."

The same industry that kills 9 million cows, hogs, chickens and turkeys every day to serve America's appetite would like Robbins discredited, and apparently a few fanatics wish him dead. But Robbins is a man of good humor, peace and a stoic sense of mission, "In a sense I feel protected because I'm not going to do anything stupid and I feel I'm doing what I am supposed to be doing." Over the past year-and-a-half he's been living a whirlwind existence, hopscotching all over the country giving talks, seminars, interviews to magazines, newspapers, radio talk shows and stalking the halls of the US government in Washington D.C. In our interview, he said he just got back from a tour through "ten different cities, ten different days and in ten different beds." Then he rests, recharging his spirit through yoga, spending time with his wife and teenage son, and overseeing EarthSave, the foundation he started after the book was published.

He has standing invitations to appear on TV's Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey talk shows. He says he'll reach 15 million people, but has had to postpone the appearances because there aren't enough copies of the book in US bookstores to meet the demand. He doesn't want to have people scurrying out to get Diet and not find it-"They'd just give up if that happened." He wants people to read the book rather than just tune into a quick face on TV, "The book is a much stronger statement and coherent vision than anything I can present in a few minutes." Weighing in at 423 pages and filled with wry humor-"To avoid preachiness"-fact and gutwrenching pathos, Diet is a culmination of Robbins' fable-like, spiritually meandering life. He began the book after a series of dreams in which a giant cow and pig explained "powerful things about life and our relationship to them and to the natural world."

Log Cabin, India and Research

John Robbins is the son of Irv Robbins, co-founder-along with Bert Baskin-of Baskin Robbins, the most successful ice cream parlor business on planet earth. His home really had that ice cream-shaped pool, and up till age 19 John was on the inside track to eventually take over the ice cream empire. He was a privileged prince, but something about the whole business gnawed at him. "I had a very deep sense of basic human values that were not reflected in my family's business and in conventional western culture." The trigger point came when Baskin Robbins came out with a slogan, "We make people happy," while he was in the advertising department. For some subconscious reason, this really burned into Robbins' mind. He went home and threw himself on his bed. Tears came and he kept thinking that no product can make a person happy. "I felt human happiness was too important to trivialize and consumerize."

So, like Prince Gautama, he left the ice cream empire, abdicating a throne in what he now calls the Great American Food Machine. "It was time to undertake a journey of healing and of conscience and of integrity in service to all beings." It was 1966, he was still a youth, barely 20, and by this time he was a vegetarian, assimilating Hindu philosophy and limbering his mind and body through long hours of hatha yoga. He married, graduated from college and at age 21 moved to a tiny, weather-beaten island off the coast of British Columbia, Canada. "I found the practices [yoga] so rewarding, so enriching, so powerful that I wanted to devote my life to them at that time to explore them further."

It was a perilously dramatic departure from his former life, as if John and his wife, Deo, were fulfilling the vanaprastha ashrama (retired, forest-dwelling stage of Hindu couples). The couple carved a little homestead out of the earth and woods, built a log cabin that was simply four walls and an iron stove and planted the seeds of a garden that at first only produced weeds. Robbins calls this period "voluntary simplicity." They lived through lean larders, numbing winters and gorgeous nature panoramas. There were no neighbors within five miles and no news and for two years they maintained as part of their sadhana complete silence, hearing only the voices of the wind and wildlife. He remarks laconically, "We were quite devoted to our sadhana practices." Yoga, four-walls, the outdoors was their life for seven years.

Eventually John and Deo started yoga classes which grew to such popularity that John founded Rising Spirit Center in 1973, a holistic health and education facility. It rapidly acquired a mystique and renown in Canada and John, who drew on his many years of sadhana and health observations and fresh schooling in psychology, entered his next life stage as a teacher. But he continued to explore, including India.

He's journeyed to India twice, "Originally just to travel around and taste the culture." He lived in the ashrams of several Hindu masters, but he really wasn't searching for sadhanas. He already had that. What he ran into was sheer physical poverty. He says he had seen spiritual poverty in many people, but never until India had he seen raw, physical poverty. He had lived in his log cabin on \$500 a year, but that was by choice. "I felt a responsibility, a strong one, to always bear in mind their presence on this earth." He says, "I'm a Western yogi," and finally one night Neem Karoli Baba, a siddha guru, appeared in a "clear, lucid, colorful, direct" dream and told Robbins he will know God better and do God's work better in the West.

Robbins returned to Canada and in 1984 left Canada for the Santa Cruz coastline of California where he plunged into the heavy surf of researching Diet For A New America.

Factory Farms, Ammonia Clouds

Movie producer and satirist Woody Allen once said, "I am at two with nature," a witty twist on the phrase being at one with nature. Humor aside, at-twoness is how most people think of nature-cows, turkeys, lichen moss, volcanoes, ice gladders and cumulus clouds-and themselves. At-oneness or feeling earth and its 10 million species as an extension of one's self is the rarer mystical state.

John Robbins' exploration is from a mystical plateau, but one he attained with cold, glinting facts and clever writing and compassion. From the outset he knew he couldn't beat people over the head with a you must-become-a-vegetarian doctrine. He would be delighted if this happened, and it does-even his own father who has kept distant from John over the past decades read the book and is following it on the advice of his doctors. Rather Robbins focuses in the first section of Diet on the plight of cattle, cows, pigs and chickens-both egg laying and for eating-in "factory farms." Factory farms are state-of-the-art manufacturing plants for raising dietary flesh as quickly and cost effectively as possible. They are huge metallic environments, sealed off from earth, sun and sky with thousands-in the case of chickens, millions-of animals stuffed into cages with zero room to move. They are "units," like tires or calculators.

Cattle never see an open range, but live in tiny stalls being pumped up on hormones and fed antibiotic-laced feed. These "feedlots" can contain 100,000 cattle. Dairy cows are bred with utters so huge they are kept on train of moving dollies, thousands rolling in twice a day for milking, their legs and joint slowly breaking from their utter's weight. The cows are so tense they are given tranquilizers. Chickens have their beaks clipped off so they won't kill each other in panic because of their constant close quarters, Pigs have their tails chopped off so they don't bite each other's tails, go into a frenzy and kill another pig. Pigs are either stacked in single cages up to a high roof or live in cages with slatted bars as a floor. Their hooves disintegrate and their skeletons buckle under their own weight. As they defecate through the cage tons of manure stacks up daily creating a noxious ammonia cloud that a human can barely stand. The buildings are so automated there are hardly any humans around. After this pathetic existence,

which Robbins very eloquently points out is so against their natural instincts and intelligence, they go to the slaughterers' knives. Here, their final hour is in stark terror as they line up in pools of blood for a fully-conscious death.

If it wasn't real, this would be a George Orwellian 1984 nightmare. But Robbins toured dozens of these factory farms. He argues that animals, even if they are raised for meat diets, shouldn't have to live so mean a life. They should at least be allowed to live the unfettered expression of their nature in normal free range conditions before death. Toward this he advises people who aren't ready to become vegetarians to buy only meat products that are raised on open ranges and without hormone treatments.

But this is only one-fourth of the book, which goes on to insightfully and convincingly discuss the merits of a vegetarian diet in terms of health, impact on the environment, natural resources and economic prosperity. It is a book that every Hindu, wherever he lives, should have, a resource ally in a world cynical of ahimsa and spiritual oneness and well-being.

We asked Robbins about awakening people from apathy to contribute to a spiritual/humane cognition of life and the planet. He replied, "One of the places apathy arises in a lot of us is we are still powerless to change things. So we get in an almost drugged state of lethargy or torpor. We just try and cope and to do the best we can. But I sense that we are in a time of real deep change in human consciousness. I don't quite know how to articulate it except that all the seeds are sprouting all over the place that have been lying there dormant, and they are sprouting in our consciousness, hearts and lives."

Diet For A New America is available for US \$12.35 plus 5% postage (US), 10% postage (foreign) from Himalayan Academy Publications, P.O. Box 157, Hanamaulu, Hawaii 96715 USA

Robbins' Gita

Excerpts: "Diet For A New America"

Increasingly in the last few decades, the animals raised for meat, dairy products and eggs in the United States have been subjected to ever more deplorable conditions. Merely to keep the poor creatures alive under these circumstances, even more chemicals have had to be used, and increasingly, hormones, pesticides, antibiotics and countless other chemicals and drugs end up in foods derived from animals. The worst drug pushers don't work city streets-they operate today's "factory farms."

But that is just the half of it. The suffering these animals undergo has become so extreme that to partake of food from creatures is to partake unknowingly of the abject misery that has been their lives. Millions upon millions of Americans are merrily eating away, unaware of the pain and disease they are taking into their bodies with every bite. We are ingesting nightmares for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Diet For A New America reveals the effects on your health, on your consciousness, and on the quality of life on earth that comes from eating the products of an obscenely inhumane system of food production. You don't have to forego animal products to derive great benefit from this book. You don't have to be a vegetarian to be concerned about your health, and to want your life to be a statement of compassion.

At the present time, when most of us sit down to eat, we aren't very aware of how our food choices affect the world. We don't realize that in every Big Mac there is a piece of the tropical rainforests, and with every billion burgers sold another hundred species become extinct. We don't realize that in the sizzle of our steaks there is the suffering of animals, the mining of our topsoil, the slashing of our forests, the harming of our economy and the eroding of our health. We don't hear in the sizzle the cry of the hungry millions who might otherwise be fed. We don't see the toxic poisons accumulating in the food chains, poisoning our children and our earth for generations to come. But once we become aware of the impact of our food choices, we can never really forget. Of course, we can push it all to the back of our minds, and we may need to do this, at times, to endure the enormity of what is involved.

But the earth itself will remind us, as will our children, and the animals and the forests and the sky and the rivers, that we are part of this earth, and it is part of us. All things are deeply connected, and so the choices we make in our daily lives have

enormous influence, not only on our own health and vitality, but also on the lives of other beings, and indeed on the destiny of life on earth.

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Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Taoists and mystics of every path acknowledge man's deep connection to all of life, his psychic and physical interdependence with the rest of existence, animate and inanimate. From this perception arises the principle of ahimsa, "non-violence," a term which implies more than not causing physical and mental injury, but encompasses the duty of compassionate co-existence with other forms of life and with the environment itself. As a human family, we are bringing much harm to the earth, harm from which we are not karmically free. If we are to reestablish harmony and rediscover empathy, we must first understand the problem, and that requires more than generalized assertions that things are bad and getting worse. John Robbins' years of research is summarized here for our readers in a digested form in the hope that a problem well defined is half resolved.

The time will come when men such as I will look upon the murder of animals as they now look on the murder of men.-Leonardo Da Vinci

Whatever I dig from you, Earth, may that have quick growth again. O purifier, may we not injure your vitals or heart.-Vedas

This section's information is compiled from John Robbins' book, Diet For A New America.

Grain Gains

Human population of United States: 243 million

Population that could be fed by grain and

soybeans now eaten by US livestock: 1.3 billion

Population who will starve to death this year: 60 million

People who could be adequately fed by the grain saved

if Americans reduced intake of meat by only 10%: 60 million

Number of vegetarians who can be fed on amount of land

needed to feed 1 person consuming a meat-based diet: 20

% of US agricultural lands used to produce beef: 56%

Pounds of beef that can be produced on 1 acre of land: 165

Pounds of potatoes that can be grown on 1 acre of land: 20,000

Pounds of grain and soybeans needed to produce 1 pound

of feedlot beef: 16

% of corn grown in US eaten by humans and livestock,

respectively: 20, 80%

% of protein, carbohydrate, dietary fiber (listed

respectively) wasted by cycling grain through

livestock: 90, 99, 100%

Vanishing Forests & Species

Number of acres of US forest which have been cleared

to create cropland to produce a meat-centered diet: 260 million

How often an acre of US trees disappears: Every 5 seconds

At present rate of deforestation, number of years

before not a single tree will remain standing in the US: 50

Trees spared per year by 1 person going to vegetarian

diet: 1 acre

Driving force behind destruction of tropical rain

forests: American meat diet

Number of square miles of rainforest destroyed in

Central America for beef pasture since 1960

(130,000 then): 50,000 square miles

How often an acre of rainforest disappears: Every 1 second

Projected year when rainforests gone due to beef

pasturage: Year 2025

Number of years before converted pasture turns to desert: 20 years

Current rate of species extinction due to destruction of

tropical forests and related habitats: 1,000 per year

Projected rate of extinction in 1990's: 10,000 per year,

1 specie an hour

Projection of how many species destroyed over

next 30 years: 1 million

Wasted Water & Energy

The western US is in the throes of a serious water shortage crisis. One source says the western states, even with limited precipitation, could support an economy and population twice its present size, but most of the water goes to produce livestock, either directly or indirectly.

User of half of all water for all purposes in

the US: Livestock production

Water needed to produce 1 pound of wheat: 25 gallons

Water needed to produce 1 pound of meat: 25,000 gallons

Current cost for pound of protein from wheat: US \$1.50

Current cost for pound of protein from beefsteak: US \$15.40

Length of time world's petroleum reserves would last

if all humans consumed a meat-centered diet: 13 years

Length of world's petroleum reserves for vegetarian diet: 260 years

Pounds of soybeans produced by the amount of fossil fuel

needed to produce 1 pound of feedlot beef: 40 pounds

% of raw materials consumed in US to produce

meat-centered diet: 33%

% of raw materials consumed in US to produce vegetarian diet: 2%

Life in a Factory Farm

Number of square feet given per beef steer in a feedlot: 14

Number of steers in a feedlot: up to 100,000

Average life span of factory farm dairy cows

(normally 20-25 years): 4

Number of 700-plus pound pigs confined to space the size

of a twin bed in typical factory farm: 3

Number of pigs that have pneumonia at time of slaughter: 80%

Wingspan of average Leghorn chicken is 34 inches; space

given in egg factory per bird: 6 inches

Number of animals killed for meat per hour: 500,000

Number of hamburgers sold by McDonalds: 60 billion

Number of cows slaughtered for McDonalds burgers: 50 million

Cost to render an animal unconscious prior to slaughter

with captive bolt pistol so that process is done humanely: 1 penny

Reason given by meat industry for not using captive bolt

pistol: Too expensive

% of total antibiotics used in US that are fed

routinely to livestock: 55%

Total number of bacterial strains now resistant to

livestock antibiotics: 99

Biological Poisoning

Cows, chickens, pigs and fish retain in their flesh all the pesticides they have consumed or absorbed. Factory farm animals build up especially high concentrations' of chemical toxins because they are fed fish meal (fish are highly contaminated), their feeds are grown on lands heavily sprayed with the most deadly pesticides; they are dipped in, sprayed with and fed many toxic substances. These toxins go on to humans and are retained in their tissues.

% of pesticide residues from meat, fish, dairy products

and eggs: 94%

Pesticide residues in US supplied by vegetables: 6%

Pesticide residues in US supplied by fruits: 4%

Pesticide residues in US supplied by grains: 1%

% of US mother's milk containing dangerous levels of

DDT pesticide: 99%

% of US vegetarian mother's milk with dangerous DDT levels: 8%

% of male college student sterile in 1950: 1%

% of male college student sterile in 1978: 10%

Sperm count of average US male compared to 30 years ago: down 50%

Principal reason for sterility and

sperm count reduction: PCB's, dioxin, DDT, etc.

To Your Health

Leading sources of saturated fat and

cholesterol in American diets: Meat, dairy products, eggs

Most common cause of death in US: Heart attack

Risk of death from heart attack by average US male: 50%

Risk of coronary death by vegetarian & pure

(non-dairy) vegetarian: 15 and 4%

Increased rate of breast cancer for women who eat

meat daily compared to women who eat meat once a week: 4 times

Rates of colon cancer in countries with low meat consumption: low

21-year study of 25,000 people shows vegetarians have lower risk of diabetes.

Studies over the past 55 years show that increased protein in the diet causes calcium loss leading to osteoporosis. High-protein and meat-based diets cause calcium to be flushed out of the body. Less protein rather than more calcium is the recommended prevention and solution.

Daily protein needs range from 2.5% to 10% (with a 30% buffer added to the high end). Even a mono-diet of potatoes will provide 11% protein. A vegetarian diet of rice, beans and vegetables provides protein/nutrient needs easily

Vegetarian Super Athletes

Only man to win Ironman Triathlon

(swimming, biking, running endurance race)

more than twice: Dave Scott (4-times)

World record holder for 24-hour triathlon

(swim 4.8 miles, cycle 185 miles, run 52.5 miles): Sixto Linares

Athlete who most totally dominated Olympic sport

in track and field history (undefeated in 8 years,

400-meter hurdles): Edwin Moses

World's premier ultra distance walker: Robert Sweetgall

Twenty records in distance running, 9 Olympic metals: Paavo Nurmi

Winner of 8 US national karate championships: Ridgely Abele

World record holder in 400-and 1500-meter

freestyle swimming: Murray Rose

Winner-Mr. International body-building championships: Andreas Cahling

World's record for downhill endurance skiing: Pierreo Verot

World's record for cross-country tandem cycling: Estelle Gray &

Cheryl Marek

World record for swimming the English channel: Bill Pickering

World record for distance butterfly stroke swim: James & Jonathan

deDonato

Winner-Mr. America body-building championship: Roy Hilligan