

[The Hidden Power Of Man's Appetites](#)

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The Hidden Power Of Man's Appetites

This is not a sermon calling errant meat-eaters to repent and forswear further forays to their favorite fast-food franchise. Unlike eating pork in Judaism or Islam, one can eat meat and still be a good Hindu. What is discussed here has equal impact on the lives of all peoples-veggies and non.

Man finds himself in an interesting predicament. The very things that fueled his progressive flight these last two centuries are now fouling his nest, and he has awakened, of late, to the realization that combustion-driven travel brings acid-death to lakes, that a collector's desire for carved ivory artifacts pushes entire species of elephants to the edge of extinction. The strength of ordinary appetites and desires has never been so obvious, nor the consequences so perilous.

Consider the power that lies hidden in the simple act of eating. If we chose to consume rice, we set in motion forces that clear lowland meadows and terrace hillsides. If we hanker for two-all-beef-patties-special-sauce-on-a-sesame-seed-bun, we loosen armies that set about to slash and burn Amazon basin rain forests so pastures can be planted for herds of cattle. If we prefer seafood, we commission armadas to drag the oceans with 300-mile-long nets, altering forever the ecology of the sea (a Hawaiian fisherman told us the other day that the Japanese fishing fleet is larger than the US navy!)

Seemingly simple desires drive powerful engines of acquisition. Like the tenuous waterway that patiently carves the Grand Canyon, our combined actions are meticulously molding the planet's future. Here is a true encounter with a trend.

Two of us were pilgrimaging to Hindu holy sites about 15 years ago. On a sweltering Madras afternoon we boarded one of those rare Indian Airlines 727s (it may have been the only one in the fleet at the time), heading southeast to

Colombo. My Macintosh II computer atlas says there are 220 air miles between the two airports. Even though the flight was less than an hour, it was around noon and a light lunch was served.

Sari-clad stewardesses plied the aisles with choreographed dexterity and soon we two sat bewildered in front of what had to be the worst looking hamburger created before or since. Its entire existence was a 3-day-old bun and a 3-ounce beef paddy. No ripe red tomato, no farm-fresh lettuce, not even a colorful dollop of mustard, ketchup or mayo. Not that the accouterments mattered to us. We were vegetarians.

No problem, we thought, motioning to a flight attendant, "Excuse me, can you bring us the vegetarian snack?" "There is no vegetarian snack, swamiji" came the reply. "You ran out already?" we inquired further. "No," she offered, "there is only hamburger today on the plane. I'm sorry."

In disbelief we held the requisite civilized inquisition, "There must be 150 people on this plane. Except for about three Europeans, they all appear to be Hindus and Buddhists. Surely they are not all eating hamburgers." "They are, swami," came the seasoned reply, "May I get you some crackers?" That proved an awakening for us. Never before had we confronted the extent to which Hindus had disavowed the vegetarian tradition. Here we were, flying from the center of Tamil Saivism to the center of Hinayana Buddhism and everyone was eating meat. Of course, it is not so in the villages, nor among the most orthodox.

Most Hindus don't know why they are vegetarians. They just are. They might feel vindicated to find that the chemistry of eating meat is not a genial one. The methods used in large modern farms to raise and kill animals causes them immense pain and terror. Ranchers feed them growth hormones and antibiotics. Their natural glandular responses pump adrenaline into the bloodstream as they are slaughtered. Biochemists have confirmed that all this ends up in and influences our body. In a very real way we are ingesting the chemical components of fear and rage. It would be naive to hope that these molecules did not continue their work in the human body. George Bernard Shaw said it rather brutally, "Think of the fierce energy concentrated in an acorn. You bury it in the ground, and it explodes into a giant oak! Bury a sheep, and nothing happens but decay."

As this issue's feature article on John Robbins shows, the wisdom of vegetarianism is being revealed anew as man delves deeper and deeper into biochemistry and its effect on human behavior and consciousness. The old teachings about ahimsa and vegetarianism, which often have degenerated into habit or unthinking dogma, are gaining validity from unexpected sources.

It turns out that Indian vegetarian cuisine is closer to being a perfectly wholesome human diet than any other (if you discount recent trends of too much sugar, white rice and fried dishes).

That's right, the menu Hindus evolved over 10,000 years proves to be better for us (not to mention animals and the earth) than Parisian entrees, Tokyo tempura, Beijing carry-out or Dallas BBQ.

The medical mind has focused our attention on matters of health (just this week Newsweek reported the largest nutrition study ever undertaken, actually 5,000 independent studies stressing less meat, more grains, fruits and vegetables). But health consequences, as noted earlier, are a mere fraction of the equation. What we eat impacts a complex matrix of forces that know no national boundaries or ethical restraint. McDonald's hamburgers consumed in Kuala Lumpur require forests to be destroyed in Brazil and water sources polluted in Europe. Bacon and eggs cooked in New York exact a heavy price in mechanical, inhumane animal care. The list is long and compelling, as you will see in our page one story and the statistics on pages 10 and 11.

Hindus have much insight to offer to the current debate on these issues, and it is hoped they will share the tradition openly in the international forum. Hope lies in the growing tendency toward socially responsible action. Wanting to be part of the solution and not part of the problem, people are investing in institutions that do not despoil the land. They are buying products that are biodegradable. They are boycotting stores that sell ivory or Bengal Tiger throw rugs. They are grazing further down the food chain. It is an irony that, in order to save the world, we may first have to find personal salvation in Vedic wisdom, pure-living and yogic principles of non-violence and simplicity.

There is hope for the requisite changes to happen over time. Observe how many in

the West have given up red meat, whether to balance the family budget or on doctor's orders. In the case of five billion people eating meat, Robbins argues convincingly that we simply cannot run the global household that way anymore and hope for health, prosperity or happiness. He holds that the very future of life on earth may well rest on our choice of food.

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