



March 2001 Contemplation Theme

Vegetarian?

By Rama Berch, C.S.Y.T., E-RYT 500

When I quit eating meat, there were not many alternatives, not even many health food stores. Now you can even get vegetarian frozen dinners! Most restaurants now offer you several vegetarian selections. I used to be able to order only a salad and baked potato. Fortunately, I like baked potatoes. I was on the cutting edge, even considered a little weird, "You're a vegetarian? What DO you eat - only vegetables?" These days it's not a big deal. Becoming a vegetarian is even applauded as a healthy lifestyle choice.

People become vegetarians for many different reasons. Many are cutting out red meat for health reasons or simply to lose weight. Others want to make a political statement about the meat industry. Social responsibility makes some concerned about the impact on world economy, "So many people are starving, and the grain that feeds the cattle would feed so many more thousands of people." The negative ecological impact has been well documented. Some people have eliminated all animal flesh but still eat seafood. Others have cut out meat in order to save money. Why would a yogi become a vegetarian?

Ahimsa. It is the first of the five yamas, which are yoga's practices to clean up your lifestyle. Each yama teaches a way to make your life into a more tangible reflection of your highest principles, by eliminating the things that drag you down. The first yama, ahimsa, is non-harmfulness. When you begin to practice ahimsa, first you notice the harmful things you do. Then you refrain from doing them. This includes the sharp words you fling at another person, as well as some of your less-than-admirable driving habits. You may even find that some physical violence needs to be stopped, whether that is hitting the dog, spanking the children, hitting another adult, or pounding your fist on tables or into walls. A primary practice of ahimsa is to not cause the death of an animal in order to fill your stomach.

Everything you have heard about the hormones in the meat is true, and they do have an effect on your mind as well as your body. A natural outgrowth of eliminating meat and fish from your diet is that you become less anxious and less aggressive. You can finally learn the difference between assertive and aggressive. You learn to speak out without being angry. You begin to communicate directly but with love. You begin to live with less habitual nervousness and become less inclined to frustration and impatience. All this from just changing your diet.

Yet none of this is why yogis gravitate toward vegetarianism. You may even have found that you've changed your diet since you began yoga without realizing why. It often happens naturally. Yoga gives you the reliable experience of the deeper inner reality. In this level of your own beingness, you are that One that pervades all. One of the very first experiences I had in yoga made this undeniable for me. I felt my body expand to become the whole universe. I felt the grasses were growing out of my skin, the skies were in my eyes, the rivers were the blood flowing through my veins. I saw the animals as my own being in many forms, and I knew I could never eat meat again. Later I discovered a passage in the Vedas that describes this as how the universe was created.

In looking around you with such new eyes, you cannot bring yourself to harm another, not even an animal, for they are all glorious expressions of the One (which is you). The profound reverence for all life permeates your whole life. Patanjali describes in the Yoga

Sutras that one who is established in ahimsa exudes an incredible peace, so profound that no one around them can feel any type of hostility. The lion lays down with the lamb. You do not have to become a vegetarian to practice yoga. Yoga will give you such profound benefits that it really doesn't matter what you eat. But if you are finding yourself drawn toward a different diet, this may help you recognize why. And you probably need to learn about a balanced diet. We will be carrying a special selection of vegetarian cookbooks for you throughout the next month, in order to help you learn how to eat in a whole new way. It is even possible that the confirmed carnivores will find a recipe or two that they enjoy!

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rama". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a heart shape drawn above the letter 'a'.

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