

BENEFITS OF A VEGETARIAN DIET

INTRODUCTION

Vegetarianism, known in Sanskrit as Shakahara, was for thousands of years a principle of health and environmental ethics throughout the Sanathan Dharma world. In Sanathan Dharma, life is of the Divine, an emanation of the Source and part of a cosmic continuum. The ancient thinkers of our Sanathan Dharma held that each life form, even water and trees, possesses consciousness and energy. Non-violence and ahimsa, the primary basis of vegetarianism, has long been central to the religious traditions of Hindu Dharma. Sivaya Subramuniaswami (2008) in his book, *Dancing with Siva*, says:

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.

This paper aims to highlight the benefits of vegetarianism from a Sanathan Dharma point of view. As has become clear from what has been said earlier, there is no doubt that our Sanathan Dharma is a Dharma of NON-VIOLENCE. Through this presentation, an attempt will be made to shed light on economic, health and spiritual benefits of vegetarianism. I will do this by referring to some literature on the topic of vegetarianism, but more especially by referring to some scriptures of our Hindu Dharma. In the second part of this presentation, I will present discussion of compassion, care, and protection of animals in Sanathan Dharma. However, before entering into these discussions, it would be beneficial to look at the question, 'What is vegetarianism?'

VEGETARIANISM EXPLAINED

Many a time we have heard people define vegetarianism as a diet, which excludes the meat of animals but includes fish and eggs. Vegetarian foods include grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, and dairy products. Natural, fresh foods, locally grown without insecticides or chemical fertilizers are preferred. A vegetarian diet does not include meat, fish, fowl, or eggs. Followers of Hindu Dharma maintain that we are an embodiment of

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Divinity - our actions must therefore subscribe to this purpose. Our food then is an offering to God. It is called "*Prasad*". We offer food which is "*satvic*" or pure in nature and this connotes "*ahimsaa*" or non-violence in its truest meaning. While all living things will probably go through this experience, what are offered as food are those things, which will experience the least pain and suffering. In fact, the Shiva Purana states that a devotee of Shiva does not even commit a mental offence or injury. Bhagwan Shiva is in meditation most of the time to exemplify the need for tranquillity of the mind.

Hindu scriptures unambiguously support the meatless way of life. In the Mahabharata, for instance, the great warrior Bhishma explains to Yudhishtira, that the meat of animals is like the flesh of one's own son, and that the foolish person who eats meat must be considered the vilest of human beings [Anu. 114.11]. Similarly, the Manusmriti declares that one should 'refrain from eating all kinds of meat,' for such eating involves killing and leads to karmic bondage [5.49]. In the ancient Rig Veda, we read: "O vegetable, be succulent, wholesome, strengthening; and thus, body, be fully grown." The Yajur Veda summarily dictates: "Do not injure the beings living on the earth, in the air and in the water." The beautiful Thirukural, 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."

With some understanding now of what vegetarianism is, let us turn our attention to some of the economic, health and spiritual benefits of vegetarianism.

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Health benefits

Many scientists today have concluded that the human's real diet is vegetarian. There are many biological and medical purposes, which explain the significance of vegetarian diet.

Firstly, the strength of hydrochloric acid in the human stomach) is only 5% of the strength of hydrochloric acid found in carnivorous animals. In such conditions, then vegetation is much more digestible than meat. Secondly, the entire digestive canal of a

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human is many times longer in comparison to body size than the similar canal of a carnivore. A meat-eating animal can eliminate decaying meat quickly, whereas humans cannot. This is one reason why today cancer of the colon and other related digestive tract diseases are increasing.

Thirdly, the proteins contained in vegetables, fruits and nuts are in a far more readily available and digestible form than "meat protein." This is why the world's largest mammals such as elephants, giraffe, and others can grow so large and live significantly longer than carnivorous animals. Fourthly, the amino acids required by the human body to repair itself physically are found in vegetables, fruits, and nuts. Lastly, meat contains many dangerous or potentially dangerous chemical substances such as cancer producing compounds, growth hormones, preservatives, tranquilizers, hormones and other different drugs fed to animals. With meat are consumed also arsenic, sodium sulphate and other chemical compound used in livestock farming.

Naturally, there are many other health factors, relating to the eating of meat. However, the factors that have been highlighted would suffice for us to understand the danger we place ourselves when we consume meat.

Economic benefits

Keeping in mind the harmful effects of eating meat, one clear economic benefit is that visits to the doctor will be reduced or minimised. Food security is being threatened. Farmers are unable to produce sufficient meat to supply the ever-increasing demand. This has seen a move towards using up large tracts of land for grazing. Previously this land was used for cultivation of crops.

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Spiritual benefits

Human values underline non-violence. Every living creature in all of aspects of life and reality is One. It is the Great Oneness of Atmic Reality. According to the Vedas if we kill or cause suffering to another living creature, we equally do so to the entire Universe and ourselves. People have limited free will and are therefore responsible for their own actions. However, they often excuse themselves that they are not responsible for killing animal when they buy meat on markets. It is essential to underline that the conditions under which animals have been bred and reared can have a profound effect on the human energetic bodies, usually not entirely visible. Animals bred for food very often experience extremely negative emotions. The slaughterer of an animal that has learned to trust his human carer, when suddenly slaughtered, passes on with vibrations of fear and hatred. Energy manifesting in the form of these powerful negative vibrations influence all who encounter them.

Most religions of the world preach NON-VIOLENCE. The followers of the Hindu Dharma, by far practice what they preach in this respect. Non-violence is a universal concept that applies to all of God's creation. Spiritually, all beings who observe Gods rule of non-violence are surely more pure than those who do not observe this law. This type of person reduces his negative karma that will otherwise accumulate.

COMPASSION, CARE AND PROTECTION OF ANIMALS

Arising out of what has already been said, there can be no doubt as to the view of Hindu Dharma towards the caring and protection of animals. Support for non-killing of animals, either for religious reasons or other, is found in the Bhagwad Gita, when Sri Krishna says to Arjuna:

ahimsā satyamakrodhastyāgah śāntirapaiśunam ...

Non-violence/non-injury, truthfulness ... these qualities belong to
godly men endowed with divine nature.

Furthermore, in the Balkand of the Ramcharitmanas, Tulsidas says:

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Jaya jaya suranaayak jan sukadaayak
pranathapaal Bhagawantha
Go dwij hithakaari jaya asuraari
sindhusutha priya kantha

In this verse, the Lord is being raised as the one who is partial to the cow. If the Lord himself has a special place in his heart for the cow, only atheists can think otherwise.

Hindu scriptures speak clearly and forcefully on non-killing and vegetarianism. The Yajur Veda summarily dictates: "Do not injure the beings living on the earth, in the air and in the water." The Manu Samhita advises: "Having well considered the 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 non-injury non-killing and non-consumption of meat are found in the Vedas, agamas, Upanishads, Dharma Shastras, Tirumurai, Yoga Sutras, and dozens of other sacred texts of Hinduism. Here are two more from the Rg Veda:

Protect both our species, two-legged and four-legged. Both foods
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. VE, 319)

One who partakes of human flesh, the flesh of a horse or of another
animal, and deprives others of milk by slaughtering cows, O King, if
such a fiend does not desist by other means, then you should not hesitate
to cut off his head.

(Rig Veda Samhita, 10.87.16, FS 90)

CONCLUSION

There are literally thousands of reasons why humans should be vegetarians and not be involved in any way whatsoever in the killing of or injury to animals. I want to conclude

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this presentation by sharing five reasons with you. In fact these five reasons will serve as a summary of what I have presented here today.

➤ The DHARMIC/SCRIPTURAL LAW reason

Ahimsa, the law of non-injury, is the Hindu's first duty in fulfillment of his religious obligations to God and God's creation as defined by Vedic scripture.

➤ The KARMIC CONSEQUENCES reason

All of our actions including our choice of food have karmic consequences. By involving oneself in the cycle of inflicting injury, pain and death, even indirectly by eating other creatures, one must in the future experience in equal measure the suffering caused.

➤ The SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS reason

Food is the source of the body's chemistry, and what we ingest affects our consciousness, emotions, and experiential patterns. If one wants to live in higher consciousness, in peace and happiness and love for all creatures, then he cannot eat meat, fish, shellfish, fowl, or eggs.

➤ The HEALTH reason

Medical studies prove that a vegetarian diet is easier to digest, provides a wider range of nutrients, and imposes fewer burdens and impurities on the body.

➤ The ECOLOGICAL reason

Planet earth is suffering. In large measure, the escalating loss of species, destruction of ancient rain forests to create pasture lands for livestock, loss of topsoil's and the consequent increase of water impurities and air pollution have all been traced to the single fact of meat in the human diet. No single decision that we can make as individuals or as a race can have such a dramatic effect on the improvement of our planetary ecology as the decision not to eat meat. Many seeking to save the planet for future generations have made this decision for this reason and this reason alone

We need to personally avoid Himsa but also we must not be accomplices to Himsa undertaken by retailers, butchers etc. In any establishment, society, country,... there are various laws/regulations/policies. However each establishment, society, country has a supreme law. All other laws are subsidiary to the the supreme law. The supreme law, eg the constitution of a country is the final word on any question. Is not the Bhagwad Gita

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such a supreme law book as it is spoken by the Supreme Law Giver. All other laws/regulations developed by sages and seers must “give in” to the supreme law.