

WHY A HINDU IS A VEGETARIAN

SWAMI ABHEDANANDA



Vedanta Philosophy

Why a Hindu is a Vegetarian

by Swami Abhedananda

(A direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna)



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About Swami Abhedananda

Swami Abhedananda was one of the 16 direct monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and a spiritual brother of the famous Swami Vivekananda. He was an intellectual giant and a person of extraordinary spiritual realizations. This is evident not only from the depth of his incredible writings, but also from his own initiation experience under Sri Ramakrishna:

“He (Sri Ramakrishna) touched my chest and aroused my *Kundalini*, the ‘Serpent Power’ at the base of my spinal column, and I went into *Samadhi*, the state of superconsciousness.”

Once Sri Ramakrishna read Swami Abhedananda’s past life and remarked: “You were a great yogi in your past incarnation.” Another time he said, “There is a partial manifestation of (Lord) Krishna in you.”

During his discipleship years under Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Abhedananda became a close friend of Swami Vivekananda and the two often engaged in many intellectual discussions on Vedanta, philosophy and metaphysics. In 1897 Swami Vivekananda, invited Swami Abhedananda to the United States and entrusted the reins of the Vedanta Society of New York, in his capable hands.

After Swami Abhedananda delivered his first public lecture in the West, Swami Vivekananda was overjoyed and remarked: “Even if I perish out of this plane, my message will be sounded through these dear lips and the world will hear it.”

The truth of these words will be obvious to anyone who reads [Swami Abhedananda’s voluminous writings on Vedanta Philosophy](#).

Kind regards,

Pulkit Mathur | Founder, The Spiritual Bee

“Who can be more cruel and selfish than he who increases the flesh of his body by eating the flesh of innocent animals.” - *Mahabharata*.

“Those who desire to possess good memory, beauty, long life with perfect health, and physical, moral and spiritual strength, should abstain from animal food.” - *Ibid*.

“Highest virtue consists in the non-killing of animals.” - *Ibid*.

WHY A HINDU IS A VEGETARIAN.

Eminent physicians and dietetic reformers of the present day are deeply interested in solving the great problem of wholesome food for human beings, and in introducing food reform in Western countries. Through their efforts thoughtful Americans are beginning to know something of the healthful effects of vegetarian diet, and to question whether they shall become vegetarians. This question has never been discussed in the West with so much earnestness as now.

Among the ancient Greek philosophers we find strong advocates of vegetarianism in Pythagoras, Plato, Socrates, Seneca, Plutarch, Tertullian, Porphyry and others; but the vast majority of Western people regard vegetarians with contempt and ridicule.

In India this problem was solved by the Hindu philosophers long before Pythagoras was born, and in their writings we find logical and scientific arguments against the killing of animals and the eating of animal flesh. Many historians and Oriental scholars are of opinion that Pythagoras owed his ideas regarding a vegetable diet to the Hindu philosophers, who from prehistoric times had advocated and practised a strictly vegetarian diet.

India is the only country in the world where vegetarianism has prevailed for centuries among the vast majority of people. The Hindus were the first nation in the world who understood the fundamental principles of the vegetarian theory. It was from the Hindus that other nations, such as the Chinese, Japanese, Thibetans, Siamese, Burmese, Ceylonese and Persians became impressed with the idea that the slaughter of animals for food is cruel, inhuman and wicked.

The greatest thinkers and sages of ancient India gave arguments in support of vegetarianism from different standpoints, such as physical health; the physiological structure

of our organs; the chemical analysis of food; and the moral and spiritual ideals of life. Native doctors and physicians in India do not approve of animal food and agree generally with many Western doctors that animal flesh is one of the main causes of such diseases as dyspepsia¹, gout², consumption³ and nervous disorders.

Hindu physicians argue that animals fattened for slaughter are more or less diseased on account of their unnatural mode of living and the unnatural food which they are forced to eat; that the germs of various diseases are introduced into the human system and that parasites come into the human body through the medium of animal flesh. They further assert that all flesh, being a product of nutrition, contains some refuse matter and impurity, because their elimination is suddenly arrested by the slaughter of the animal. Some of these refuse materials are intensely poisonous, especially *creatin*. Animal flesh enriches the blood with unnecessary *fibrin*, and this produces unnatural heat in the system and in turn is the cause of unusual activity and restlessness, ultimately leading to the nervous debility which afflicts many meat eaters. Constant use of meat increases the action of the heart and brings premature loss of vital forces. Physiologists and comparative anatomists like Sir Everard Home have shown from the structure of the teeth, stomach, alimentary canal, the microscopic human blood-corpuscles and the digestive processes that man is by nature more related to frugivorous animals than to the carnivora.

From the chemical analysis of different vegetables, cereals, fruits, nuts, etc., and the flesh of different animals, and from the comparison of the constituent properties of vegetables with those of animal flesh, it can be shown that everything necessary for the growth of the muscles, for the strength of the nerves, and for the nourishment of the whole body can easily be obtained from the vegetable kingdom. As from animal food are obtained the proteids, fats and mineral matter, which are the principal factors in the nourishment and healthy growth of the body, so from the vegetable world these elements are supplied in rich abundance, and in addition to these the *carbohydrates* (starch and sugar), which cannot be found in animal food.

This being the fact the question arises, why do we eat animal flesh? Is it for nourishment? No. The same nourishment can be obtained from vegetables, cereals and pulses. Is it for health that we eat meat? No; because vegetarians as a class are healthier than the majority of meat eaters. Why, then, is meat eaten? Because of the habit transmitted from generation to generation, and because of superstition, prejudice and ignorance.

In ancient times when agriculture was unknown, people lived upon fruits, nuts and other vegetable products which they found in abundance. But when the struggle for existence,

1. **Dyspepsia:** a condition of impaired digestion characterized by pain in the upper abdomen.
2. **Gout:** Acute inflammatory arthritis caused by elevated levels of uric acid in the blood.
3. **Consumption:** In the past tuberculosis was called consumption.
(Source: Wikipedia)

which is so strongly manifested in the animal kingdom, became more difficult on account of the scarcity of fruits and nuts, they lived upon whatever they found around them. In that struggle the question of existence must precede the question of food. The savage tribes who do not know anything about agriculture and have not proper fruits and nuts, live chiefly upon wild animals, birds, reptiles and insects. Thus began the eating of flesh by man.

Some people argue that flesh is the natural food of man, but this is not so. The meat-eating habit was formed through the force of necessity, and was handed down from father to son. Most people in civilized countries learn to live on animal flesh from their infancy, their parents teaching them by their example. They thus grow to think that they can hardly live without a diet of animal flesh. Some savage tribes became cannibals when they could not procure enough meat of wild animals. Shall the habits of cannibals signify that human flesh is the natural food of man? In Australia the aborigines live on loathsome worms and reptiles. In India there is a class of aboriginal hill-tribes who eat poisonous snakes with great relish. Shall we say that these are the natural food for man?

A man can eat anything with the help of cookery. But shall it be considered that man is naturally as omnivorous as a pig? The cows at Cape Cod eat the refuse of fish; horses can be taught to eat beef; bears can be trained to smoke tobacco; monkeys easily learn to drink tea, coffee and wine. Will such artificially acquired habits supply the arguments for man's eating flesh? Certainly not. The natural food of man is not animal flesh, but vegetables, fruits, nuts, cereals, etc., which grow spontaneously on this earth.

When Hindu boys and girls go to school and read their first lessons they learn the highest humanitarian principles, and as they grow older they are kind toward all living creatures. They are taught: "Be kind to lower animals. Do not kill them for your food, because the natural food of man is not an animal." I learned in the first book of Sanskrit: "When enough of nourishment can easily be obtained from that which grows spontaneously on the earth, who will commit such a great sin as to kill animals for filling his stomach and deriving a little pleasure of taste?"

"Compare the eater with the animal that is eaten. The one has pleasure which lasts for a few seconds, and the other is deprived of all the pleasures of life." Seneca expressed a similar idea when he said: "Vegetables are sufficient food for the stomach into which we now stuff valuable lives."

It is extremely difficult for people in the West to realize why it is sinful to kill animals for food or for pleasure. Their religion stands like a great stumbling block in the way of their

understanding. It teaches that the lower animals have no soul, no mind, no feelings; that they have been created for the food of human beings, and the duty of man is to eat what the merciful Lord has created for his sustenance and thank Him in return. This is the reason that so many animals are killed for Thanksgiving and Christmas days in Christian countries, as though the merciful Lord would not accept prayers unless some of His creatures are killed and eaten.

A minister of a high church in London was present when I was talking about vegetarianism, and said to my friend: "Do not listen to these ideas; our Scriptures say they are the doctrine of devils," referring to the passage in the New Testament, "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;...commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer" (I. Timothy, iv, 1, 3, 4, 5).

How is it possible for people who believe in such sayings as the word of God to think that the killing of animals for food is sinful? As it is impossible for a Christian believer in this teaching to think that the slaughter of animals for food is sinful, so it is impossible for a Hindu to believe that the lower animals are created for this use by a merciful Lord. The idea that animals were created for food for man is entirely Semitic in its origin. Such a doctrine is horrible to the Hindus, because their religion does not teach that this world was created out of nothing by an extra cosmic personal God sitting on a throne somewhere in the heavens and commanding men to eat animals whom He created for this purpose.

The Hindu religion with all its various phases, such as the religion of the Vedas (which is erroneously called Brahminism), Buddhism and Jainism, is based upon the one fundamental principle, —the evolution of man from lower animals. It teaches that one life principle is manifesting in various forms of the mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms; that all are linked together by a mighty chain of evolution; and that from the minutest protoplasm to the highest man, each stage of life differs from another not in kind, but in degree.

The religion of the Hindus denies entirely that the lower animals are without mind, soul and feeling; and teaches that life and mind are manifested simultaneously. Wherever there is life there is the manifestation of the cosmic mind, the difference being in the degree of manifestation. The least expression is in the mineral, it is a little higher in the vegetable, and still higher in the animal kingdom. Even a unicellular amoeba has mind. It feels pain and tries to avoid that sensation. Advanced scientists of modern times do not deny this. Prof. Le

Conte expresses this idea most forcibly in some of his lectures. As we rise in the animal kingdom we find the expression of the same life and mind in and through highly developed animal bodies; and ultimately, through the most individualized and complex organism of the human body. Each one of these animals possesses a soul, has individuality and the sense of “I,” can feel pleasure and pain, has fear of death and struggles to live. The germ of life in each one of these will gradually pass through the various stages of evolution and ultimately appear in a human form.

Therefore, the religion, philosophy and Scriptures of the Hindus teach that as life is dear to us, so is it dear to the lower animals; as we do not wish to be killed, so they too shrink from death. “Do not kill any animal for pleasure, see harmony in nature and lend a helping hand to all living creatures,” say the Hindu Scriptures. The earliest writings of the Hindus, I mean the Vedas, teach: “*Ma himsyat sarva bhutani*,” that is, “Do not kill any living creature either for food or for pleasure.”

The great epic of the Hindus, the Ramayana, or the exploits of Rama, teaches that we should treat lower animals as our brothers, and describes their value in the economy of nature in the most poetic and dramatic way. It is said that Rama, the great Incarnation of God in flesh and blood on earth, fought with the king of demons in order to rescue Sita, his devoted wife, who was captured by the demoniac King of Ceylon. His huge army consisted of all kinds of animals. The ape, Hanuman, the greatest of organized life beneath man in the scale of evolution, was the commander-in-chief. The bear is described as the prime minister, and other animals as soldiers. The whole story is written in such a masterly manner that whoever reads it can never be unkind or cruel to any animal, not to speak of killing it for food.

Western people have the mistaken impression that Buddha was the reformer who introduced vegetarianism amongst the Hindus. This is an error. Buddha merely popularized the doctrine of non-killing taught by the Vedas, which was practised at that time by only a limited class of Hindu sages; he also protested against animal sacrifices performed by the priests. The priests sacrificed animals not for the purpose of eating flesh, but for propitiating the Devas or bright spirits, through whose mercy they thought they would gain higher powers and conquer their enemies.

Some people say that in the economy of nature the struggle for existence demands that one animal shall live upon another, as birds of prey live upon other birds, as carnivora live upon other animals; and that we are therefore perfectly justified to live upon animal flesh. It is true that in nature we find the expression of such a law. It is a law that governs the lower animal

nature. We may call it a brutal law. But there are other laws which govern our better nature. These are moral and spiritual laws which do not express themselves in lower animals but in human beings alone. If we do not recognize these higher laws we shall never rise above the animal plane. Man stands at the head of the animal kingdom not because he possesses in a highly developed form the same qualities that the lower animals have, but because he is capable of subduing the animal nature by the moral and spiritual.

A man lacking this moral and spiritual nature is in no way better than the lowest order of brutes. Human beings have the power of degrading themselves to the lowest animal plane as well as of raising themselves to the highest plane of spiritual enlightenment. They can manifest perfectly their divine nature. In short, they can live on earth as embodiments of all good. The same human being may carry destruction, havoc, disharmony, and inhuman cruelty wherever he goes, or he may bring help, good-will, peace, love and blessings. The same energy when guided by animal nature creates havoc and becomes diabolical; when directed by higher nature and love it brings happiness to all.

Think of the moral degeneration of the slaughterhouse butchers. The continuous contact with slaughter blunts their higher feelings and at last makes them brutal. They do not hesitate to drive the same knives with which they kill helpless beasts into the hearts of their fellow-men. Chicago has the largest slaughter-houses in the world. Many thousands of animals are killed there every month by trained butchers. Most of the murderers in Chicago come from the butcher class. Who is responsible for their moral degeneration and for the crimes committed by them? Do the meat eaters ever think of this phase of flesh eating? They neither like to hear such facts nor to think of them, because it shocks their sensitive feelings. They want to close their eyes and ears to such sights and sounds. But the truth is that meat eaters are responsible. They are indirectly the causes of all the wicked deeds done by those butchers; they are the causes of their moral degeneration. If there be no meat eater, there will be no butcher. A refined woman would shudder at seeing a red-handed butcher, but she should remember that she must share the responsibility of brutalizing and degrading him. If she killed the animals by her own hands, for her own food, it would be better, for this would save another from becoming an inhuman slayer for her.

In every country butchers are considered as heartless and feelingless. In India they are debarred from the society of gentlemen, and the Hindus think that there is no stronger curse than to call a man a butcher. In the United States in some commonwealths no man connected with this trade is allowed to sit in a jury for trying a murder case, because it is recognized that the mind, feelings and whole moral nature become blunted by association with the slaughter of animals. If the process of furnishing flesh from the slaughter-house to

the kitchen were remembered when sitting at table with a savory piece of steak before them, I dare say two-thirds of the meat eaters who have any feeling at all would give up meat eating without delay. A young American of my acquaintance who visited the slaughter-houses in Chicago was so deeply impressed by the brutality, cruelty and inhuman atmosphere of the place that he never touched any meat from that day. No individual who eats animal flesh can avoid moral responsibility. He must necessarily take a share in the cause of the moral degeneration of his brethren.

Various objections have been raised by meat eaters against vegetarianism. Some say if animals are not used for food they will overrun the earth. The same argument applies to animals which are not eaten, such as horses, donkeys, dogs, cats and rats, as to sheep, cattle, pigs and poultry. In India the Hindus do not kill cows, but they are not overrun by them.

The Hindus did not have any slaughter-houses until the British Government established them. In the states that are still governed by the Hindu Rajas the wild animals and birds are protected by strict laws. But these states are not overrun by wild animals, nor are the inhabitants driven out by them.

An American who recently made a short visit to India, Dr. J. H. Barrows, formerly of Chicago, said in a lecture in New York that he saw in the streets of Benares some oxen lean and poor as compared with those which are fattened for the Chicago slaughterhouses. His heart melted with kindness and pity at the sight, and he said it is much more kind to kill cattle for food than to allow them to live half-fed or ill-fed. What a curious notion of kindness is this!

Dr. Barrows also said that if we do not eat fish the seas and oceans will soon become a solid mass of fish. Any efforts of man to keep down the number of fishes would be vain without the operation of nature's laws, which regulate production and preserve a proper ratio. But this sort of statement and argument is not uncommon from friends of the flesh-eating habit.

Others hold that unless they eat animal flesh they will be weak and useless for work and will lack bravery and courage. This is a great mistake. You have heard of the Hindu Sikh soldiers in India, who are the bravest and strongest fighters in the British army. They never turn their back to an enemy in the battle-field. One Sikh soldier can stand against three beef-eaters in hand-to-hand fight. But these soldiers never touch meat, nor fish, never drink wine, nor smoke tobacco. They are strict vegetarians. Millions of Scotchmen have become healthy, strong, hardy and intellectual while living on oatmeal. In a running race of seven athletes in

Germany, amongst whom there was one vegetarian, it was shown that a vegetarian can win over meat eaters even in athletic sports.

A vegetarian diet gives great endurance and makes one even-tempered. People generally mistake a ferocious, restless and rash temper for courage and strength. These say that a tiger or a wolf is stronger than a horse, a buffalo or an elephant. They make ferocious nature the standard of strength. It is true that a tiger can kill a horse, but has he the muscular strength which enables a horse to draw a heavy load a long distance? A tiger can kill an elephant, but can he lift a cannon weighing hundreds of pounds? Ferocity is one thing and muscular strength is another; we ought to distinguish the one from the other. The source of strength lies in the vegetable kingdom and not in flesh and blood. If flesh eating be the condition of physical strength, why do meat eaters prefer the flesh of herbivorous animals and not that of the carnivora? Some meat eaters say that animal flesh has a large quantity of vegetable energy concentrated in a small compass. If that be their reason for the meat-eating habit, they ought to live on the flesh of carnivorous animals and birds, such as tigers, wolves, vultures and hawks.

As in the animal kingdom the carnivora are more restless than the herbivora, so amongst men we find that meat eaters are more restless and less self-controlled than vegetarians. As a peaceful, well-poised and self-controlled nature is the first sign of spiritual progress, it is plain that animal food is not the most helpful diet for spiritual development. It is for this reason that meat eaters find it so difficult to concentrate their minds on one particular object. It is impossible for them to meditate on their spiritual and divine nature. Therefore the Hindus, who understand the secret of spirituality, object to meat eating.

The Hindus who devote their whole life and mental energy to the attainment of spiritual perfection are called Yogis. According to them the non-killing of animals is one of the conditions of spiritual progress, and killing any animal, either for food or pleasure, is a great stumbling-block in the path of spirituality. Again, they classify the killing or injuring of animals in three divisions,—“committed,” “caused,” and “approved of.” For instance, I may kill an animal myself; this will be, according to the Yogis, “committed.” Secondly, I may cause another to kill; and thirdly, I may approve of the killing committed by another person, as by buying the flesh from a butcher. According to a Yogi, he who wishes to practise non-killing must not kill; must not cause another to kill; and must not approve of the killing done by another. When this non-killing or non-injuring is perfectly established in a Yogi, he receives injury from none, not even from tigers nor from snakes. Tigers and snakes injure us because we have the feeling of injuring them. In fact the Yogis in India have carried the golden rule to its extreme and applied it to lower animals even, thus succeeding in making it a universal

law. In the presence of Yogis ferocious animals become peaceful and render them great service. Such a state is idealized in the images and pictures of the greatest men and women Yogis in ancient India. The great Yogi Siva has most venomous snakes as ornaments on his neck, head and body. The great woman Yogi Durga stands on the back of ferocious tigers and lions. Truly speaking such Yogis have no enemies in the world.

Another reason why a spiritually advanced Hindu does not like meat, is that eating flesh and drinking wine go hand in hand. It is a well-known fact that many people acquire the habit of drunkenness in trying to digest animal food with the help of liquors; and as drinking leads to all sorts of other vices, a Hindu believes that one can most easily be free from those vices by being a vegetarian. The Hindus are strongly opposed to drinking wines or liquors. If a high-caste Hindu gentleman should go to a saloon or should drink publicly, he would lose caste. Hindu women do not touch wine. In Hindu society no one can find a drunken woman, as one finds in the streets of cities in Western countries. The Hindus allowed no saloon in large cities; but now, under the demoralizing influence of the liquor trade of the British Government, one finds hundreds of saloons in some cities. Hindus cannot understand how a civilized nation can approve of liquor trade and opium trade; can seek to demoralize sober people by opening saloons in villages, and inducing the poor laboring classes to acquire habits of drunkenness by offering them strong liquors at no cost. Many people have asked me again and again whether the Hindus have become more moral under the British rule. They would not ask such questions if they knew the demoralizing effects of liquor trade and opium trade in India, and also if they remembered that wherever a Christian missionary goes, a bottle of brandy or whiskey soon follows him. The vegetarian Hindus do not touch wine, even in the form of a medicine.

Lastly, a Hindu is a vegetarian from the standpoint of love. Love means the expression of oneness. The Hindus love lower animals because of oneness. Their ideal is to realize that one spiritual Being is manifesting through all living creatures. The divine Spirit which is dwelling within us and illuminating our inner nature with the light of intelligence and consciousness is also dwelling in lower animals. Their ideal is not a vague, indefinite and meaningless word, such as "brotherhood." They wish to realize that we are one in Spirit with the lower animals, one with every living creature. Their religion teaches: "Love every living creature as thy Self," because the same Self or Spirit is in all. "Realize the Self or Spirit within you; then you shall be able to see the same Spirit everywhere. He, who realizes the one universal Spirit everywhere, cannot kill Spirit by Spirit." He becomes truly unselfish. He is ever ready to help all.

Whenever we kill any animal for our food or pleasure we are selfish. It is on account of extreme selfishness that we do not recognize the rights of other animals and that we try to nourish, nay, even to amuse ourselves, by killing innocent creatures or by injuring them, or by depriving them of their rights. This kind of selfishness is the mother of all evil thoughts and wicked deeds. That which makes us selfish and helps us to cling to our lower self is degrading and wicked; that which leads us towards unselfishness is elevating and virtuous. That which prevents us from realizing the oneness of Spirit is wrong; that which opens our spiritual eyes and helps us to see that Divinity is expressing itself through the forms of lower animals, and makes us love them as we love our own Self, is godly and divine.

Every kind of food which we take into our bodies produces changes in our system, both physical and mental. Those who have carefully examined the changes that are produced in their minds by meat diet and who have struggled for self-control, will find it extremely difficult to govern animal passions, violent nature and restless condition of mind without giving up animal food. Thus, looking at the food question from various standpoints, a Hindu is a vegetarian and cannot advocate the eating of animal flesh.

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