

Vegetarianism – Part 1: A Philosophical and Historical Perspective

by Gary Null, PhD, and Martin Feldman, MD

Earlier this year, the United Nations released a report which stated that a “substantial worldwide diet change” will be needed to reduce the effects of agriculture on the environment. Not surprisingly, the substantial change recommended by the UN is a move away from the consumption of animal products. As noted on the *Guardian* website, the UN report urges a global shift toward a meat- and dairy-free diet to help “save the world from hunger, fuel poverty, and the worst impacts of climate change.”^{1,2}

For those of us in the West, the UN report provides another piece of evidence in favor of a vegetarian lifestyle. Yet consumers who are considering a switch to vegetarianism may have questions about various aspects of the diet and lifestyle. This three-part series of articles provides information on vegetarianism that will help health-care providers to answer such questions. Part 1 provides a philosophical and historical discussion of vegetarianism; Part 2 discusses nutritional aspects of a vegetarian diet; and Part 3 covers more practical aspects related to this diet, such as economical and taste issues.

What Is Vegetarianism?

Minimally, being a vegetarian means nothing more than abstaining from the flesh of warm-blooded animals. But in practice, there are many different approaches to vegetarian eating. Here a few definitions:

- **Vegans** live on plant foods alone, eating vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, grains, and legumes. This regimen omits all animal foods, including meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products, fish, and honey (because it is made by insects). Vegans also abstain from all products derived from animals, such as leather or even wool and silk.
- **Lacto-vegetarians** include dairy products in their diet in addition to vegetables.
- **Lacto-ovo-vegetarians** consume eggs along with dairy products and vegetables.
- **Pesco-vegetarians** add fish to their diet. Hundreds of millions of Asians live on the staples of rice, fish, and vegetables.
- **Pollo-vegetarians** eat poultry (chicken, duck, game, birds) but omit red meat.

A Brief History of Vegetarianism

As indicated by the Latin root of *vegetarianism* – *vegetare*, “to enliven” – this practice has always offered a healthful approach to both diet and life. The health benefits are one of the main reasons that people choose to become vegetarian. Throughout much of human history, in many parts of the world, meat also has been relatively unattainable, causing people to get their nutrients primarily from plant foods.

The practice of vegetarianism also is connected with religious disciplines

that espouse a meat-free diet and respect for animal life. We will cover these religious beliefs in more detail later, but the historical connection between vegetarianism and religion should be noted here. The book of Genesis advocates a decidedly vegetarian diet of fruits, seeds, and nuts.³

Vegetarianism also has roots in the early history of the East, where ancient religious beliefs held that the human soul transmigrated to “lower” life forms. Followers maintained a vegetarian diet out of respect for the animal life that may be housing human souls. Buddha later commanded: “Do not butcher the ox that plows thy field,” and “Do not indulge a voracity that involves the slaughter of animals.” Buddhism quickly spread eastward from India, becoming the state religion of China around 500 AD and arriving in Japan a century later. For Japanese Buddhists, vegetarianism included the belief that eating animal flesh polluted the body for 100 days.⁴

In the Hindu religion of India, vegetarianism is founded on health standards formulated in the Hindu epic poem *Mahabharata*: “Those who desire to possess good memory, beauty, long life with perfect health, and physical, moral and spiritual strength, should abstain from animal foods.” It has been estimated that 20% to 42% of India’s 1.1 billion population is vegetarian.⁵

Some Egyptians also were vegetarian, according to analysis of

the intestinal contents of mummies. Some of these ancients have earned the modern nickname "the eaters of bread."⁶ Much later in the Middle East, Mohammed's holy book of Islam, the Koran, prohibited the eating of "dead animals, blood, and flesh."⁷

But it is ancient Greece that boasts the beginnings of the real vegetarian movement, founded by Pythagoras and supported by the likes of Plato and Socrates. What began as religious policy grew into a conviction that vegetarianism was natural, hygienic, and necessary for healthy living.⁸

The Romans were an unlikely vegetarian race, conquering the known world with an army fed in part on bread and porridge, vegetables, wine, and occasional fish. "The Roman army conquered the world on a vegetarian diet," writes historian Will Durant. "Caesar's troops complained when corn ran out and they had to eat meat."⁹

But after the fall of the Roman Empire, vegetarianism fell into disfavor for some 1200 years, and only the devotion and dedication of a few cloistered orders of the Catholic Church – chiefly the Benedictines and the Cistercians – kept it from extinction. Finally, the ancient teachings were revived during the Renaissance, and modern vegetarianism was born. The "new" ideology also had many influential adherents, including Sir Frances Bacon, Shakespeare, Voltaire, and Benjamin Franklin, to name a few of the most famous vegetarians.¹⁰

Despite, or perhaps because of, the general increase in meat-eating that had occurred by the 19th century, most European countries witnessed the growth of organized vegetarian movements. It was one of England's most revered vegetarians, Reverend William Metcalf, who carried the movement across the sea to America in 1817 (though John Wesley, who promoted vegetarianism for health reasons, also had visited America almost a century earlier). In 1850, the American Vegetarian Society was established. The cause was furthered by Anna Kingsford, a 19th-century medical practitioner who devoted

much of her scientific writing to the subject of vegetarianism. She reported that the strongest animals in the world, including the horse, elephant, hippopotamus, and rhinoceros, were herbivorous, eating only plant foods, and drew parallels to the amazing athletic prowess of the ancient Greeks.¹¹

Real strides in scientific vegetarianism came about as a result of World War I, when food scarcity prompted scientists in the US to reevaluate the national diet. Forced to find alternative sources of protein, they discovered the health benefits of abstaining from meat at the same time. The American way of handling meat shortages was emulated by other countries as well: In 1917, Denmark adopted a simple, meatless wartime diet based on whole grains, vegetables, and dairy products. The result was overall improved health and lowered mortality rates.^{12,13} During World War II, Norwegians drastically cut their meat consumption, turning instead to cereals, potatoes, and other vegetables. Once again, vegetarianism improved the country's health and lowered mortality rates. Not surprisingly, these health statistics were reversed when the war ended and "normal" meat consumption resumed.¹⁴

Religion and Vegetarianism

Diet has always had a place in the teachings of the world's great religions. The reasons for endorsing vegetarianism may include ethical considerations against the taking of life and even consideration of the health benefits.

Particular doctrines and guidelines vary, of course, but each discipline has specific beliefs about food. Religion recognizes that a person's spiritual awareness involves his or her physical state to some degree. It is difficult to be pure of spirit while inhabiting a polluted body. Physical purity has been equated with a vegetarian regimen for thousands of years by many religious groups.

Here is how various religions view vegetarianism:

Seventh-Day Adventists. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a Christian denomination that, since its formal establishment in 1863, has preached the benefits of whole vegetarian foods. Considered among the healthiest people in the US, Seventh-day Adventists still believe that a strong, pure body is essential to the spiritual aspirant. What one eats is as important as how one prays, since both are ways of communicating with the divine.

Ellen G. White, one of the founders of the church, advised her loyal followers to adopt a vegetarian diet. "Vegetables, fruits and grains should compose our diet. ... The eating of flesh is unnatural. Many die of disease caused wholly by meat-eating; yet, the world does not seem to be the wiser. The moral evils of a flesh diet are not less marked than are the physical ills. Flesh food is injurious to health and whatever affects the body has a corresponding effect on the mind and soul."¹⁵

It is difficult to weigh the spiritual effects of meat consumption in terms of scientific research, but White's warnings of its physical effects have been shown to be accurate. Approximately half of Adventists follow vegetarian diets.¹⁶ The Adventist lifestyle also includes abstinence from smoking and alcohol, regular exercise, and fellowship with other church members. Researchers interested in whether this lifestyle confers health benefits have conducted a number of mortality studies of its members, and the results have shown that "it is quite evident that the Adventist lifestyle does provide some protection" against cancer and other fatal diseases, such as cardiovascular disease.¹⁷ Whatever the immeasurable benefits of following the church's spiritual guidelines, there is no question about the healthful benefits of adhering to its dietary regimen. In fact, contemporary Seventh-day Adventists will tell you that the two are inseparable, with physical health feeding spiritual calm and insight. ➤

Vegetarianism

Hinduism. Hinduism is well known in the West for its doctrine of reincarnation. Yoga – an offshoot of orthodox Hinduism – combines meditative exercise and breathing techniques with a vegetarian regimen, in a religious tradition based on the idea of reincarnation. Yoga first became known to the West chiefly for its exercise program, but today many people in our part of the world embrace it as a religion. The yogi believes that all living beings go through a series of rebirths, taking on many forms. It is not surprising, then, that meat-eating is thought to bring on negative karma, and is therefore strictly forbidden.¹⁸ The ideal foods are those containing life energy, such as vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes, and grains. It follows that the meat of dead animals, which have lost their prana (the “life force”), is useless and should be avoided.¹⁹

Sufism. In the land of Mohammed, the Islamic Sufi sect has been known for centuries for its mystical qualities, which have been borrowed from Zoroastrianism. Members once wore undyed wool garments called *sufi*, hence their name. The clothes were worn because they were uncomfortable and therefore demonstrated a disregard for the comforts of the flesh and the material things of the world, a disregard that was believed to be pleasing to Allah. Modern Western Sufis are not the ascetics that their Eastern counterparts are, yet some do practice the famous whirling dancing of the “dervishes” – Sufis who seek to elevate their level of consciousness beyond the physical realm through ecstatic dancing. The Sufis also practice austerity in the

form of vegetarianism, a lifestyle adopted because of its simplicity and its avoidance of gluttony and excess. Their diets are similar to those of the yogi.²⁰

The Vegan Society. The Vegan Society, founded in England in 1944, is not a religious group, but its emphasis on nonviolence and reverence for life gives it a strongly spiritual cast. Vegans do not eat any animal products and try to limit their diet to the most wholesome, alive, energy-filled foods. They emphasize unaltered, unprocessed, whole foods such as raw vegetables and fruits, nuts, seeds, and grains, while eschewing alcohol, tea, coffee, soda, processed foods, and the use of tobacco.²¹

In sum, it is true that whole grains give us substance, sprouts and juices offer energy, and vegetables provide the variety and vitality essential to good health. But even more, a wholesome vegetarian diet is the underpinning of the harmonious balance of body, mind, and spirit.

Famous Vegetarians

Throughout the ages, people have reasoned their way to the decision to eat a meat-free diet. In ancient Greece, Socrates and Plato taught that vegetarianism was the ideal diet, while in India and Arabia, Buddha and Mohammed, respectively, advised against meat consumption. A meatless diet also was embraced by such well-known artists, writers, and scientists as Leonardo da Vinci, Sir Isaac Newton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Darwin, Leo Tolstoy, H. G. Wells, and Upton Sinclair.

The list of well-known vegetarians is quite long. These people have attributed longer life, clearer thinking, optimum body performance, and even creative inspiration to their eating

style. It is fascinating to follow the evolution of the vegetarian lifestyle from ancient to modern times and to note the reasons given by some famous vegetarians for their eating habits. Gandhi, the Indian leader and pacifist, felt such a strong kinship with animal life that he couldn't bear the thought of using innocent creatures for food. “To my mind,” he said, “the life of a lamb is no less precious than that of a human being. I should be unwilling to take the life of a lamb for the sake of the human body.”²²

Albert Schweitzer was another legendary vegetarian. The theologian, musician, physician, and philosopher echoed Gandhi's philosophy when he wrote, “There slowly grew up in me an unshakable conviction that we have no right to inflict suffering and death on another living creature unless there is some unavoidable necessity for it, and that we ought to feel what a horrible thing it is to cause suffering and death out of mere thoughtlessness.”²³

George Bernard Shaw viewed meat consumption as “cannibalism with its heroic dish removed.” He attributed his long, productive life as a sociopolitical analyst and writer to his healthful diet. “I flatly declare that a man fed on whiskey and dead bodies cannot do the finest work of which he is capable,” he wrote. “I have managed to do my thinking without the stimulus of tea or coffee.” Shaw boasted that he felt “seldom less than ten times as well as an ordinary carcass eater.”²⁴

Shaw felt so strongly about the vegetarian way of life that in 1918 he published *The Vegetarian Diet According to Shaw* to dispel misconceptions about vegetarianism. “An underfed man is not a man who gets no meat, or gets nothing but meat. He is one who does not get enough to eat, no matter what he eats. The person who is ignorant enough to believe that his nourishment depends on meat is in a horrible dilemma.” Shaw further believed that naturally harvested foods continually nourished the life force within him. He wrote, “Think of the fierce energy



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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."²⁵

Philosopher Henry David Thoreau dedicated pages to the ideals of vegetarianism. He felt that "it is a part of the destiny of the human, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized."²⁶ Like Shaw, Thoreau thought that avoidance of meat improved his work.²⁷ In his masterwork, *Walden*, he wrote, "I believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic facilities in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food." His abstinence from meat, coffee, and tea was not so much for health reasons as because "they were not agreeable to my imagination."²⁸

Coming in Part 2: Nutritional aspects of a vegetarian diet.

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Vegetarianism



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