

VEGANISM • WILL TUTTLE

WHAT THEN SHOULD WE EAT?

GLOBAL WARMING, inequity, war and the other problems we face are a direct result of our cultural attitudes and practices. Is there an idea that could transform the roots of our culture and lay a solid foundation for peace and sustainability? A timeless, universal idea that is beckoning to us three times a day but which we mainly fail to recognise? Yes, I believe there is, and it's our daily food.

Our most immediate and socially significant connection with the larger order is through eating food. Our food choices are a surprising and overlooked key to understanding our culture and ourselves. By making wise food choices, we can transform our world into a place of harmony and abundance.

We were all born into a culture that forced us, virtually from birth, to eat the flesh and secretions of certain animals who are bred, confined and killed for this purpose. Early on, we are taught the habit of disconnecting the reality that is on our plate from the reality of getting it onto our plate. We became masters of the art of disconnection.

There is no greater taboo in our culture than honestly discussing the environmental devastation, cruelty and disease caused by using animals for food. The reason it is such a taboo is that in our hearts we yearn to live in a world of kindness and respect for all life. We naturally feel a kinship with animals. So we repeat to each other many erroneous myths such as the protein myth, the taste myth, and the no-soul myth to justify our routine abuse of animals; but the main cause of our ongoing oppression of animals is our disconnectedness: we turn away. All the institutions of religion, science, media, family, government, business and education co-operate to keep our catastrophic abuse of animals well-hidden, ignored and trivialised.

And catastrophic it is. Not just to the animals, but to us as well. For example, the most forcibly ignored cause of

Choosing the right kind of food is an imperative for environmental sustainability, social justice and personal health.

global warming is eating meat and dairy products. According to a recent major study by the United Nations entitled *Livestock's Long Shadow*, the single largest contributor to greenhouse gases, of all human activities – greater even than all transportation by car, truck, bus, boat, train and plane – is livestock production. Breeding millions of cows, pigs and other animals for food is the greatest source of nitrous oxide (from manure), a greenhouse gas 296 times more powerful than carbon dioxide, as well as animal-generated methane gas, which is twenty-three times more powerful. The science on this is unequivocal.

Eating animals requires massive

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amounts of fossil-fuel inputs, directly pumping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In the West, we transport over 70% of our corn, soybeans, oats and other grains to feed animals. We pump water to irrigate these fields, and manufacture millions of pounds of fossil-fuel-based fertiliser and pesticides to grow animal feed. We use vast amounts of fossil fuel to house and slaughter billions of animals yearly. The end result of all this is that while

it takes two calories of fossil fuel to produce one calorie of protein from soybeans, and three calories for wheat and corn, it takes fifty-four calories of fossil fuel to produce one calorie of protein from beef! It's easier to see the gallons of petroleum poured into our cars than it is to see the gallons of petroleum poured into our cheese, eggs, fish and meat. We waste huge amounts of petroleum for our meat, and send our young to war to ensure the supply.

On top of this, the primary driving force behind deforestation is cattle grazing and clearing land to grow soybeans and other grains to feed factory-farmed chickens, pigs and fish. This is a further major contributor to loss of biodiversity and global warming. Sixty per cent of fish is now factory-farmed, causing severe water pollution and decimating wild fish populations. Our limitless appetite for factory-farmed fish, birds and mammals has brought our oceans to the brink of collapse. Dairy cows are fed huge quantities of fish to 'enrich' their feed to increase milk and meat output. It takes three to five pounds of caught fish to make one pound of farmed salmon. We have exterminated fish, turtles and sea mammals to such an extent that jellyfish are now taking over parts of the ocean, and fishing vessels have to go out so far that they use ever-increasing amounts of fuel. A recent study published in *The Lancet* medical journal concluded that the only effective way to reduce greenhouse gases is to reduce human consumption of animal foods.



ILLUSTRATION: MATT KENYON

CONVERTING PRECIOUS LAND and grains to animal fat, protein and sewage is extravagantly wasteful. It is the main driving force behind water pollution, topsoil loss, habitat destruction, and the ongoing extinction of species that many biologists say is the greatest threat our Earth is facing.

Eating animal flesh, dairy products and eggs is also supremely unjust. With our higher incomes, we buy grain and feed it to animals whose flesh and secretions we eat and drink, driving up the price of grain so that millions suffer starvation. Thich Nhat Hanh has

summed it up well: "Every day, 40,000 children die in the world for lack of food. We who overeat in the West, who are feeding grains to animals to make meat, are eating the flesh of these children."

A diet based on animal foods devastates our personal health. Animal fat, animal protein and cholesterol are directly implicated in heart disease, diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis, kidney disease, strokes, cancers, arthritis and many other ailments. The largest human nutrition research project ever conducted, the China-Cornell-Oxford

study, concluded that "the closer one approaches a total plant-based diet, the greater the health benefit."

Eating animal foods also devastates our human spirit. Meat production requires a merciless exploitation of what we know in our bones is the most sacred dimension of life: mothers giving birth, nesting and nurturing their babies. Female animals are usually raped with sperm guns, their babies are stolen from them and killed, and the mothers (mere 'breeders') are also killed for their flesh after several years of cruel treatment.

We drug them, rape them and terrorise them, we sicken, oppress, imprison and torture them and destroy their families, and we wonder why we find pandemics of rape, terror, oppression, incarceration, torture and family breakdown in our human world. As we sow, so shall we reap. We employ whole armies of men and women to do the horrific work of confining, mutilating and killing billions of hapless animals, work that is bound to harm them and those around them both physically and psychologically. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "violence anywhere hurts everyone, everywhere." We are all connected.

VEGANISM – STRIVING TO minimise our violence towards animals – is indeed an idea whose time has come. Veganism reflects our true nature. Veganism is simply seeing all living beings as sentient beings to be respected rather than seeing them as commodities to be used and consumed. The motivation underlying veganism is compassion. As each of us awakens to the power of this idea, we will reduce animal cruelty and suffering as well as our abuse of the Earth. Our personal, social and spiritual health are all connected.

In our culture, there is no more powerful lifestyle change than switching to a plant-based diet, because this shift will lead to sustainability, to healing and to compassion for the countless animals, humans and future generations to whom we are related. As we allow others to be free and healthy, we become free and healthy. ☸

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