

A Fishy Photo

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Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/2176>

Natalie: Hi, Ted. I've just found your website and was going to read the posts on it and buy the book by James Swartz. However, I saw the photo of him holding a fish. Even if the fish was not dead, I don't imagine that it would like having a hook stuck in the roof of its mouth and frantically trying to be free. I like people who respect animals, not maim or kill them with a smile. How do you see it?

~ Regards, Natalie

Ted: Hi, Natalie. I'm not exactly sure what the intention of your question is.

If you are simply inquiring about my take on the treatment of animals, then my response is that I too love animals and believe that they should be respected as the divine manifestations that they are. Ideally, that would include not eating them, but the fact is that throughout history people from all cultures have consumed animal flesh for their sustenance. Some have to do so given their geographical local and climate, while others have done so due to cultural circumstances. It is true that in modern society we don't have to rely on animals as a food source, but unless one is knowledgeable concerning how to obtain the proper nutrients strictly from plant sources and one has the time (and money to a certain extent) it takes to properly prepare the food for each meal, which according to an Ayurvedic physician I recently consulted requires roughly two to three hours per day, then one runs the risk of malnourishment. This was the case with me. For years I maintained a strictly vegetarian diet. Because I did not properly account for all the nutrients I would get from meat sources, I ended up with a variety of health issues, including an almost debilitating chronic soreness in my joints, tongue blisters, slow healing, compromised vision, low blood pressure and swelling in my extremities, brittle nails and fatigue, that I am only now beginning to remedy exclusively through a more balanced diet that includes meat. So if I were living in a culture where the matriarch of the household or a hired cook spent the day in the kitchen preparing nutritious vegetarian meals for the family, then I would fully advocate maintaining a strictly vegetarian diet. Since such is not the case for the vast majority of us living in the modern world, I advocate the moderate and mindful consumption of meat.

Of course you might argue that James does not need to fish in order to feed himself. He could very well buy his meat at the market. To this point I would simply respond, "What's the difference?" Either way an animal was killed in order that you might live. In fact it is probably more mindful to procure the meat directly, as having to face the animal whose life you are taking in order to sustain your own almost certainly evokes a greater appreciation of the constant sacrifice that characterizes life and a greater sense of gratitude for the gift one is receiving. Along these same lines I might remind you that plants are living beings as well, and thus even a vegetarian diet requires the sacrifice of life. Ultimately, there is no way around the fact that life feeds on life. Whether we like it or not, this is the way life in the world works. Therefore I believe humility, gratitude, moderation and mindfulness is the approach one should take regarding whatever food source one chooses to draw from.

Now, if you are questioning the veracity of James' presentation of the teachings of Vedanta or my own (due to my association with James) because of the fact that both James and I eat meat, then I can assure you that our teaching is in full alignment with the *sampradaya*, the Vedantic teaching tradition, that has preserved the integrity of the teachings and the methodology by means of which they are systematically unfolded since the time immemorial. In this regard, the teachings are neither James' nor my own. Though the process of self-inquiry through which we were led under the guidance of a qualified teacher – he by Swami Chinmayananda, and I in turn by James – has enabled us to lay to rest all our misconceptions concerning, and doubts regarding, the teachings through a scrupulous analysis of our own experience, the teachings that we expound are not based on our own experience. In other words, we didn't make them up. We are simply mouthpieces for revealed wisdom as laid out by the ancient *rishis*, “seers,” or “knowers of truth,” in the *Upanishads*, and as such we utilize the same *prakriyas*, methods of analysis, that have proven since time immemorial to be the infallible means of leading the qualified seeker to the understanding of his or her true nature as limitless awareness.

If the issue of eating meat is insurmountably problematic, however, and you would feel more comfortable learning from a teacher who doesn't eat meat, that is perfectly understandable. If such is the case, I would recommend undertaking self-inquiry under the guidance of either Swami Paramarthananda (who is located in Chennai, India, and thus whose availability to answer questions I am uncertain of, but whose talks are available at HinduOnline.co/AudioLibrary), Swamini Atmaprakashananda (who is located in London, England, and who offers a whole progressive program of Vedantic self-inquiry AtarshaVidya.org.uk) or Swami Tadatmananda (who is located in New Jersey, USA, and whose talks on various Vedantic scriptures are available at ArshaBodha.org).

In any case, if an understanding of reality, self-knowledge, and ultimate inner freedom are your goals, I highly recommend that you continue your investigation of Vedanta. You'll find no better means of “attaining enlightenment.”

~ All the best, Ted

Natalie: Thank you for your reply, Ted.

I understand that some bodies need to eat meat to be healthy. It was the photo of James Swartz standing and smiling that I found objectionable. He looked proud to have killed the fish. I know that some people hunt and fish for enjoyment. Before seeing the photo I had just read a post about a man helping a dying squirrel and a moment of deep connection between them.

Thank you for the names of the Vedanta teachers.

~ Best wishes, Natalie