

Is It Necessary for Health to Be Vegan?

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Sonja: *The China Study* has proved that vegetarianism is the healthiest diet. I have seen some of the articles that debunk this, as well as many debunking the debunks. There are whole conversations between Colin Campbell and Denise Minger over a number of years. I don't know about Colin Campbell being arrogant, but he does have an impressive number of qualifications!!! I have always taken a great interest in nutrition and read lots about it, but I have no qualifications to really make any kind of judgment about it, other than my own experience.

The health benefits of a vegetarian diet for me so far have been very positive. I don't have good genes. My mother and sister both died of cancer, my brother has been diabetic since a young age and my father has heart disease, so I feel very lucky to thus far have good health.

I didn't become vegetarian initially for health reasons, although now I do think it can be a healthy diet when one eats the right nutrients. My main reasons for choosing my diet are the non-harming of animals and sustainability.

I used to be more of an activist in my promotion of vegetarianism, but I have dropped being vocal about it. I respect everyone's freedom to make their own choices, and I also realize it is something that most people have strong opinions and emotions around, including myself, and avoiding conflict is more important to me than being right!

Sundari: You have a balanced attitude, which is great. I avoid discussions on nutrition because of the inherent emotional charge and moral imperative they elicit. All the same, it is an area I have studied in-depth for decades and is the subject of one section of my forthcoming Vedanta lifestyle book because it's very relevant to peace of mind, which affects self-inquiry.

Although there are many so-called experts that will tell you their way is the way, there is no such thing as one rule fits all, all the time. There is essentially no right or wrong about anything in the apparent reality; it all depends on what you value most. And, for many, how much we normalize suffering. It is quite amazing how hard it is for many to revise their ideas about what they eat in particular, and more importantly, to make the connection between their health and what they eat. I am often astounded by the misinformation and downright manipulation of nutritional information by the media. Most people don't know what to believe and common sense does not seem to prevail.

Unfortunately, in the apparent reality, because duality is operating, polarization is inevitable when it comes to knowledge of objects. With all the conflicting research and information that is available, it is quite clear that anyone could promote almost any view about anything, especially since the advent of social media. For every hypothesis that nutritional science constructs, an alternative or opposite theory is possible, with all the research to prove it. Though I am extremely knowledgeable on all aspects of diet, I do not prescribe any one diet for anyone, because there is no such thing.

That's because in *mithya* everything is true and nothing is true. Beyond the few immutable laws of physics and physiology, there is nothing in this world that stands independent of belief and opinion. I never argue with anyone if they hold a strong point of view, because it is inescapably true that when someone is strongly invested in certain beliefs they tend to avoid or fail to investigate equally sound moral or scientific findings that challenge their view, such as your comments that Colin Campbell's *The China Study* is the hallmark of truth regarding a healthy diet.

When I first read *The China Study*, I loved it, as I was vegetarian at the time, like you mostly for moral reasons, and I wanted to believe it was a healthier way to live. As it is for you, it was my nutritional bible, for a while. When that lifestyle was clearly not working for me health-wise, I reluctantly started studying other research. And there are mountains of it, older and much more recent, all peer-reviewed, all bona fide studies and in many ways, much more rigorous than *The China Study*, all of it challenging Campbell's claims, while there are some conclusions in *The China Study* I still agree with. But what I found was that all studies based on the vegetarian/vegan belief system tend to be much less open to the opposite view than the ones that included animal products. And that's because nobody denies that plants are good for us and essential in our diets. I totally agree that plant sources should take up the majority of our food intake.

There is no doubt that *The China Study* and Campbell, like so many well-meaning researchers, had confirmation bias and was guilty of academic hubris, thus flawed research. He brandished his quite considerable academic credentials and armour to great effect though. He is still considered the high priest of militant non-meat-eaters. I was very disappointed to discover this, but it led me to many years of research and learning to be more open-minded and balanced about what constituted "good" nutrition and trustworthy science. I had to overturn many of my own ideas about diet and I have since found very different answers to the moral imperative, especially since Vedanta came into my life.

All the same, at the end of the day, psychospiritual factors are as important as a balanced healthy diet that works for you, bottom line. If you are happy and healthy the way you live, that is what counts. We must all follow our *svadharma*. I agree with you that the moral perspective of a vegetarian/vegan diet is comforting, no doubt about that either. But sadly, it is illusory because one cannot avoid "killing" to survive in *mithya*, that is just a fact.

There is no moral high ground on this. If you are alive, something is dying to feed you, even if it's just the insects and animals that live on and in the habitat of the plants you eat. That is the way *Isvara* set it up. Is a plant really less conscious than an animal or an insect? It's alive and does not want to be eaten. What about the enormous tracts of land cleared for mono-crops, is that any worse than land cleared for grazing animals? Biodiversity is still sacrificed; many animals die in the process. Vegetarians and more so vegans tend to have a blinkered view and to turn their dietary choices into a self-righteous, militant, cult-like ideology, which does not serve their health, the planet or their peace of mind.

While there are few absolute truths in *mithya*, it is an indisputable fact that *Isvara* placed some absolutely vital nutrients for humans found only in animals, and though some of these are found in plants, they are not of the equal nutritional value. If one gives up eating animal products, it is advisable to make sure you are knowledgeable about how to eat and what and how to supplement if health is important to you. Nonetheless, what constitutes a healthy diet is an individual thing to a large extent.

Just look at the Inuit or the Maasai or the Herero people – among so many other people around the globe who are primarily meat-eaters and hardly eat plants at all, yet are exceptionally healthy. Why did Campbell not study them? Why did he leave out healthy meat-eating populations in China, like the Tuoli? Because they did not fit with and challenged his view.

Have you read the Weston Price research? Illuminating stuff still to this day. In his worldwide study of the eating habits of many diverse people, he found that while there were common aspects to most diets (like most people around the world ate some animal products), what he and many other researchers established is that we all have different requirements due to any number of factors and variables which are constantly in a state of flux. Even 100 years ago, Price established proof that the only diet that is indisputably a health hazard is our modern Western diet with its preponderance of processed food. Without fail, all the indigenous tribes he studied were healthy if they had minimal contact with civilization. While some were predominantly vegetarian, the one thing they all had in common was that they ate healthy forms of saturated fats, no artificial food-like substances high in sugar and trans fats, and drinks drowned in high fructose sugar.

As with all things, knowledge and common sense are what makes the difference. Any idea that is fanatical and refuses to consider other points of view will be flawed, it's a given.

~ Love, Sundari