

## Ahimsa Beyond Vegetarianism

*By - Surbhi Shah*

*Jain Study Center of NC*

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Before I begin to discuss "Ahimsa Beyond Vegetarianism", I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that becoming vegetarian and maintaining that lifestyle is, in itself, a great way to express our respect and concern for the environment, the other animals, and ourselves.

For some people, becoming vegetarian is a change which requires considerable determination and effort. For many of us, vegetarianism was made easy: it was a gift from our culture.

And since vegetarianism is just one of the many opportunities to practice non-violence, we look beyond vegetarianism.

To begin, I would like to talk about some immediate extensions of a vegetarian diet.

### **1. Ahimsa Beyond Your Diet...cruelty-free products and practices**

As you may know, many animals are used for the unimaginably cruel and painful testing of personal care and household products. In a great number of cases, this testing is not only unnecessary, but also misleading. However, more and more companies are finally getting the message: many Americans have let them know that they don't want products which involve cruelty to animals. In response to public pressure, a growing number of companies are now producing "cruelty-free" products without animal testing and without animal ingredients. Where, earlier, you could only get cruelty-free products by mail or in specialty stores, now they are available nearly everywhere. By sending \$5 to PeTA you can get an up-to-date listing of all the cruelty-free products you'll need and where you can buy them locally. Some products even say "cruelty-free" on the label. It takes a little figuring out to start with, but in no time it will just become automatic for you to pick out your new brands of shampoo, lotion, and dish detergent off the shelf. By choosing to buy from amongst the growing number of cruelty-free products, we are actively practicing Ahimsa.

Another direct extension of a vegetarian diet is a closer look at what we wear. By avoiding the use of unnecessary animal products such as silk, pearls, ivory and fur, and by seeking alternatives to leather and suede, we recognize that these products "cost" other creatures a high "price"...their lives!!! As we reduce our use of these products, we take our dollars away from the producers of "cruel" products, and use our cash to support those who provide the "cruelty-free" alternatives.

Entertainment is an area in which it is easy for us to express our support for Ahimsa. Circuses, zoos, rodeos, lion safaris and theme parks such as Marineland, and Sea World have repeatedly been found guilty of the cruel and inhumane treatment of animals. These acts are losing their former popularity as the public is becoming more sensitized to the price the animals pay...What could possibly be fun about watching a fellow creature imprisoned in a cage, torn away from its home, or beaten until it surrenders its will? Well, the people at Cirque du Soleil ("Seerk dyoo So-lay") didn't think cruelty was fun at all. This troupe is a world class circus with amazing acrobatics and other acts -- but no animals whatsoever. (Their name, "Seerk dyoo So-lay", by the way, means "Circus of the Sun", in French.) When will other circuses and zoos stop mistreating

animals? When they find that they aren't making enough money at it. So when friends suggest an outing to Sea World or a local zoo, we can suggest a local amusement park or another attraction, instead. By thinking of other places to go, we can make sure that every one -- including the animals -- have a good time.

I've talked about animals whose bodies are used to make products, those used to test them and those made to perform...what about all the other creatures of the world? We can be kind to these animals by adopting a lifestyle which sustains the physical environment -- which is home to all the earth's creatures.

People are becoming more aware of the effect which their lifestyle has on the physical environment: the garbage we produce is sent to landfills which leak toxins into our water; the pesticides sprayed on fruits and vegetables cause birth defects in humans and other animals; the consumer goods we buy are using up the earth's raw materials such as metals, wood, minerals and fuel. The good news is that alternatives to these damaging practices are becoming increasingly available: we can choose organic fruits and vegetables which are grown without pesticides, we choose energy-efficient cars or public transport, and we can find more "environmentally friendly products". It is interesting by the way that, most of the time, environmentally friendly products are also cruelty-free.

But, reading labels, and looking into how various products are made can seem like a huge task. Perhaps the easiest way to reduce our impact on the physical environment is just to simplify our lives: use less products and conserve energy.

Sometimes it takes a little effort to make some of these changes in our lives: it means changing our old habits or gathering new information. But, have no doubt that before long you will find others asking you for that same information.

Often friends who aren't vegetarian want to know more about vegetarian nutrition and where to buy cruelty-free products. Or simply what to eat, or where to eat out. By getting the facts and learning about the alternatives, we can have this information on hand, to pass on to friends.

So far, I've talked about the choices we make in what we buy: choices in what we eat, what we wear, and what kind of entertainment we support. These are the choices we make as consumers; in other words, they are choices we make about how we spend our money. These are important choices since, as they say, "money talks". However, there are a lot of other choices we make everyday which also give us a chance to practice non-violence.

I would like to talk, next, about some choices we make beyond our choices as consumers.

There are many choices we make in our personal lives which make an impact on the world around us.

## **2. Ahimsa Beyond Our Role as Consumers**

Each day we encounter the many creatures with whom we share the earth: birds, squirrels, insects, plants and other creatures not visible to the naked eye. Kindness to these creatures can be as simple as preventing any avoidable injury to them. Releasing an insect which has been trapped indoors, or taking care to avoid stepping on earthworms on a wet sidewalk takes only a few minutes for us and makes a world of difference to them. Caring for these creatures takes some patience, but it is a simple habit which we can develop, wherever possible.

Perhaps the most challenging creatures we deal with, however, are the other human beings in our lives. Being kind to other creatures usually involves changes in our lifestyles and habits. These take some thought and awareness, some creativity to think up alternatives, some commitment, and finally a decision; but, after a

time, they become automatic. Vegetarianism, veganism, and cruelty-free products all become habitual.

Not so with kindness toward other people. The everyday struggle to not hurt others, to not get angry at others, to understand them, to understand their feelings, noting how we speak to others, how we behave with them...this requires a constant, untiring awareness of our motivations, and our insecurities: What makes us insult others? What makes us exclude an outsider from a "clique"? This subtler side of Ahimsa makes us look deeper within than we ever imagined.

So far, we have talked about Ahimsa as something which is defined in a negative way...not killing, not harming...this is just the beginning of Ahimsa, however. It has much greater and more positive aspects. If we are against harm to others, what are we for? Ahimsa includes being for compassion, working for peace, for social justice, for education.

Of course, sometimes, these two aspects go together. As a student in a biology class, for example, I can request alternatives to dissection. (In recent years, teachers have been more supportive of students requesting such alternatives.) It is interesting to note how when I make such a request, I am speaking up for myself and the animals (preventing harm); but at the same time, I am educating the teacher, and helping the other students in the class who were uncomfortable with dissection (promoting understanding).

It helps to think of Ahimsa, not as a principle which requires sacrifice, but rather as a direction which offers us exciting opportunities to get involved.

Next, I would like to give some examples of such opportunities.

### **3. Ahimsa Beyond Non-Violence**

Our lives as students and working people also present us with opportunities to practice Ahimsa. To begin, we can choose to avoid work which involves violence or injustice. Better yet, we can try to find work which actually helps others. Once on the job, we can make efforts to work on projects which promote compassion, peace, social justice. From the medical student or doctor who promotes alternatives to dissection, to the electrical engineer who designs devices to aid the blind...the lifestyle of Ahimsa presents us with exciting projects and possibilities.

### **4. How do we do all this?**

Ahimsa presents us with challenges in every area of our lives. How should we approach these challenges so that we don't get overwhelmed or intimidated by them?

First, it helps to recognize that every person has their own comfort zone, and based on their personality and skills will choose the challenges which fit the unique person they are, and the situation they are currently in.

Choose a challenge which appeals to you, which uses your special skills, and which is worthwhile and meaningful to you. The fact that you have a direction will usually attract all sorts of other people who would like to help out but don't have a project of their own.

Second, to understand how to practice Ahimsa in North America, it is useful to look to other communities which share our concerns...joining forces with supporters of vegetarianism, animal protection and environmental protection, for example, gives us a place to start, and surrounds us with like-minded people.

In this context, I would like to mention two ethnic communities who you may not have heard as much about. The Quakers and the Mennonites are two communities which, like ours, have non-violence as part of their

culture. However, they have been here for generations now, and have had time to identify ways to practice non-violence in North America. The Quakers are known for their development of peaceful ways to resolve real-world conflicts and other their work for peace. The emphasis of the Mennonites is service: their community has hundreds of volunteers ready to travel anywhere they are needed, to provide relief during emergencies and natural disasters. We can learn from these communities, support their efforts and look to their example since they, in their own way, share our concern for Ahimsa.

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PeTA Address:

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

"1995 Shopping Guide for Caring Consumers" (Catalog #5119)

P.O. Box 42516, Washington DC 20015