



The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism

Mohandas K. Gandhi

Speech delivered by Gandhi to the London Vegetarian Society on 20 November 1931

Mr, Chairman, Fellow Vegetarians, and Friends,

When I received the invitation to be present at this meeting, I need not tell you how pleased I was because it revived old memories and recollections of pleasant friendships formed with vegetarians. I feel especially honoured to find on my right, Mr. Henry Salt. It was Mr. Salt's book *A Plea for Vegetarianism*, which showed me why apart from a hereditary habit, and apart from my adherence to a vow administered to me by my mother, it was right to be a vegetarian. He showed me why it was a moral duty incumbent on vegetarians not to live upon fellow-animals. It is, therefore, a matter of additional pleasure to me that I find Mr. Salt in our midst.

I do not propose to take up your time by giving you my various experiences of vegetarianism nor do I want to tell you something of the great difficulty that faced me in London itself in remaining staunch to vegetarianism, but I would like to share with you some of the thoughts that have developed in me in connection with vegetarianism. Forty years ago I used to mix freely with vegetarians. There was at that time hardly a vegetarian restaurant in London that I had not visited. I made it a point, out of curiosity, and to study the possibilities of vegetarianism and vegetarian restaurants in London, to visit every one of them. Naturally, therefore, I came into close contact with many vegetarians. I found, at the tables, that largely the conversation turned upon food and disease. I found also that the vegetarians who were struggling to stick to their vegetarianism were finding it difficult from the health point of view.

I do not know whether, nowadays, you have those debates, but I used at that time to attend debates that were held between vegetarians and vegetarians and between vegetarians and non-vegetarians. I remember one such debate, between Dr. Densmore and the late Dr. T. R. Allinson. Then vegetarians had a habit of talking of nothing but food and nothing but disease. I feel that that is the worst way of going about the business. I notice also that it is those persons who become vegetarians because they are suffering from some disease or other—that is, from purely the health point of view—it is those persons who largely fall back. I discovered that for remaining staunch to vegetarianism a man requires a moral basis.

For me that was a great discovery in my search after truth. At an early age, in the course of my experiments, I found that a selfish basis would not serve the purpose of taking a man higher and higher along the paths of evolution. What was required, was an altruistic purpose. I found also that health was by no means the monopoly of vegetarians. I found many people having no bias one way or the other and that non-vegetarians were able to show, generally speaking, good health. I found also that several vegetarians found it impossible to remain vegetarians because they had made food a fetish and because they thought that by becoming vegetarians they could eat as much lentil, haricot, beans and cheese as they liked. Of course those people could not possibly keep their health.

Observing along these lines, I saw that a man should eat sparingly and now and then fast. No man or woman really ate sparingly or consumed just that quantity which the body requires

and no more. We easily fall to prey to the temptations of the palate, and therefore when a thing tastes delicious we do not mind taking a morsel or two more. But you cannot keep health under those circumstances. Therefore I discovered that in order to keep health, no matter what you ate, it was necessary to cut down the quantity of your food, and reduce the number of meals. Become moderate; err on the side of less, rather than on the side of more. When I invite friends to share their meals with me I never press them to take anything except only what they require. On the contrary, I tell them not to take a thing if they do not want it.

What I want to bring to your notice is that vegetarians need to be tolerant if they want to convert others to vegetarianism. Adopt a little humility. We should appeal to the moral sense of the people who do not see eye to eye with us. If a vegetarian became ill, and a doctor prescribed beef tea, then I would not call him a vegetarian. A vegetarian is made of sterner stuff. Why? Because it is for the building of the spirit and not of the body. Man is more than meat. It is the spirit in man for which we are concerned. Therefore vegetarians should have that moral basis—that a man was not born a carnivorous animal, but born to live on the fruits and herbs that the earth grows. I know we must all err I would give up milk if I could, but I cannot. I have made that experiment times without number. I could not, after a serious illness, regain my strength, unless I went back to milk. That has been the tragedy of my life. But the basis of my vegetarianism is not physical, but moral. If anybody said that I should die if I did not take beef tea or mutton, even on medical advice, I would prefer death. That is the basis of my vegetarianism.

I would love to think that all of us who called ourselves vegetarians should have that basis. There were thousands of meat-eaters who did not stay meat-eaters. There must be a definite reason for our making that change in our lives, from our adopting habits and customs different from society, even though sometimes that change may offend those nearest and dearest to us. Not for the world should you sacrifice a moral principle. Therefore the only basis for having a vegetarian society and proclaiming a vegetarian principle is, and must be, a moral one. I am not to tell you, as I see and wander about the world, that vegetarians, on the whole, enjoy much better health than meat-eaters. I belong to a country which is predominantly vegetarian by habit or necessity. Therefore I cannot testify that that shows much greater endurance, much greater courage, or much greater exemption from disease. Because it is a peculiar, personal thing. It requires obedience, and scrupulous obedience, to all the laws of hygiene.

Therefore, I think that what vegetarians should do is not to emphasize the physical consequences of vegetarianism, but to explore the moral consequences. While we have not yet forgotten that we share many things in common with the beast, we do not sufficiently realise there are certain things which differentiate us from the beast. Of course, we have vegetarians in the cow and the bull—which are better vegetarians than we are — but there is something much higher which calls us to vegetarianism. Therefore, I thought that, during the few minutes which I give myself the privilege of addressing you, I would just emphasise the moral basis of vegetarianism. And I would say that I have found from my own experience, and the experience of thousands of friends and companions, that they find satisfaction, so far as vegetarianism is concerned, from the moral basis they have chosen for sustaining vegetarianism. In conclusion, I thank you all for coming here and allowing me to see vegetarians face to face. I cannot say I used to meet you forty or forty-two years ago. I suppose the faces of the London Vegetarian Society have changed. There are very few members who, like Mr. Salt, can claim association with the Society extending over forty years.

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