

ALWAYS AHIMSA

By Madeline Schaefer

Veganism has gotten a bit of a bad rap in the past ten years, to say the least. A term coined in the 1940s by professor Donald Watson, vegans refrain from eating all animal products with the intention of living a life that does not exploit any living thing. Understood from its basic philosophy, most people would likely support a vegan lifestyle. Few people want to harm others, especially animals. So why such a backlash against the trend?

Perhaps the resistance comes from most people's resentment of being told what or how to eat, especially if that telling is accompanied by too much vigor. Most vegans are perceived as, well, annoyingly committed to the superiority of their vegan philosophy, for both physical and ethical reasons. It is this evangelistic spirit that most people find less than appealing.

But something else lies beneath the grating nature of people's opposition to veganism. All of the arguments about its health benefits aside, vegans often seem to challenge our moral core. Vegans demand that we connect our food with our beliefs, a challenging task in an increasingly complex world.

You'll find a good deal of crossover between the vegan world and the yoga community due to the idea of "ahimsa" or nonviolence that pervades both philosophies. Yoga, like veganism, understands all thoughts and actions as contributing to our overall wellbeing, including how and what we eat.

Within this yogic philosophical reality, our spiritual health is intimately tied to our physical health. It is not enough to exercise or "eat right"; true health and vitality is only found by a holistic, connected approach to life and living. The Spirit with which we eat and the energy of the food we consume affects our entire being. Yoga students, like vegans, see—and more importantly, feel—the bigger picture.

Who has time to "tune in" to the Spiritual effects of food? Often life just happens and our sensitivity to what we consume goes out the window. I, for example, can often get so wrapped up in my own health and physical appearance that I can forget to make choices that will expand my experience rather than simply fix it. Rather than tapping into why I need that coffee to keep me going, I'll drink cup after cup in the hopes that my underlying exhaustion will simply disappear. We are all guilty of taking shortcuts, especially those of us living in urban areas, where stress is simply a way of life.

It was only when speaking with my Ashtanga yoga teacher, Eagle, on the island of Kauai, that I began to feel into food and wellness as a powerful opportunity to confront my own darkness and create peace within myself and in the world around me. Eagle has been a vegan for 10 years, but started to phase out animal products 10 years earlier when he switched to a vegetarian diet. As a professional racquetball player he found himself performing better than ever, and felt his connection to the philosophy of yoga

grow as he incorporated the daily practice of ahimsa. Three times a day, he says, he takes some time to consider the other and practice peace in the world. He has been increasingly inspired over the years by men and women like Dr. Ellsworth Wareham, whose lifelong commitment to a vegan diet is a true testament to the diet's capacity to support happy, vital, and healthy lives.

His approach to eating and food is part of a bigger project that he calls "FUSION". Having survived a debilitating car accident at 19, Eagle recovered to full health after a spinal surgery using the practices of yoga, meditation, visualization, veganism, healing (methods for attaining peace, ease and freedom) and affirmation. Eagle understands that health can only be attained by balancing mind, body, and spirit, and that we have a powerful capacity to effect change around us through our everyday actions.

As I spoke to him about his commitment to a vegan lifestyle, I began to also slowly consider how my food makes me feel—not only on a physical level, but on a spiritual level, as well. Eating too much meat can make me feel heavy, while eating vegetables makes me feel light and vital. Perhaps removing animal products from my diet completely will lighten my mind and spirit as well, I thought. While I wasn't convinced to switch right away (my constitution occasionally calls for the grounding nature of foods such as eggs and fish), I did begin to once again investigate the ways food helps or hinders my ability to be a kind, open, conscious human being.

Veganism is a practical, powerful way to create peace in the world by refusing to participate in an industry that exploits the lives of so many animals. As Eagle says, "our use of animals for energy is as outdated as our use of oil for energy." But more than any particular belief or conclusion, veganism and its adamant supporters, provides us all with an opportunity to take some time to consider how our food affects not just our bodies, but our minds and our spirits.

According to Ayurveda, yoga's sister science for physical health and vitality, all food contains different energetic qualities that fall roughly into three categories—tamasic, rajasic, and sattvic. Tamasic foods are dense and heavy, promoting weight gain, while overstimulating and heating foods are considered rajasic. Foods that promote physical and mental clarity and wellbeing, on the other hand, are considered sattvic, and these foods should be eaten whenever possible for optimal health. Sattvic foods contain vital life force, or prana, and include fresh fruits and vegetables free from cruelty, over-processing, or harmful chemicals.

None of these qualities are inherently good or bad, but simply describe effects. As we live lives of increasing sensitivity to ourselves and those around us, we begin to perceive more and more how food either contributes to or takes away from our ability to be kind, open, and giving human beings. As we begin to perceive the way food affects our energetic body, we can then make decisions on what to consume based on our increasing sensitivity to the energetics of food.