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# Why are yogis vegetarians?

The origins of vegetarianism and how it is connected to the ancient traditions of yoga. *By Liz Shaw*

Whether you're a yoga expert or novice, you've probably heard of the connection between yogis and vegetarianism. "Aren't all yogis supposed to be vegetarians?" is a key discussion amongst yoga enthusiasts, academics and also advocates of vegetarianism and veganism. Some popular yoga schools such as BKS. Iyengar and Jivamukti strongly put emphasis on the necessity of a vegetarian diet. So, in accordance with these schools, why should a yogi follow a meatless diet and where does this belief originate?

## Early days

So where did it all begin? Vegetarian lifestyle as a consequence of karmic beliefs in reincarnation can be found in very early civilisations. Historical documents report that religious groups in ancient Egypt followed an animal flesh-free diet and abstained from wearing animal derived clothing around 3,200BC.

In India, the birthplace of yoga philosophy, Brahmanism was the Vedic period's main religion. It was in this era (1,500 BC to 500 BC) that texts providing the basis for what we know today as yoga philosophy, were composed in Sanskrit. Whilst Brahmanists were known and increasingly criticised during this time for slaughtering animals as a central rite, allusions to vegetarianism and questions on ethics of animal slaughter are found in Vedic literature.

Four old sacred scripts known as Vedas ('vedás' is the Sanskrit word for 'knowledge') contain passages in which the concept of soul transmigration appear, with avoidance of harming any other living being strongly recommended. In the Sama Veda, the third of the four books, the verses provide the basis for future practice of vegetarianism, as they remind to refrain from sacrificial slaying.

Non-harming of animals and of other living beings is prescribed as a means to karmic liberation from material existence and suffering. Severe criticism of rites and sumptuous lifestyles of Brahman priests led eventually to the rise of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, new religions that promote vegetarianism. Followers of Hinduism believe in the idea of a perpetual cycle of rebirth and transmigration of the souls. This cycle could only be ended if one lost attachment to material objects, cravings and desires and led an ethical life that included vegetarianism. Followers of Buddha refuse killing, war, aggression and animal slaughter. And the teaching of Jainism is based on the concept that all things have life, hence total non-violence and vegetarianism in 'thought, word and deed' were mandatory rules.

## Yoga literature

American scholar and founding editor of The Journal of Vaishnava Studies, Steven J. Rosen, an advocate of vegetarianism, points out in his book 'Food for the Soul: Vegetarianism and Yoga Traditions' (2011) that all main yoga lineages can be traced to two yogis. And both of them were vegetarians: Sri Krishnamacharya and Swami Sivananda. >

< Sri Krishnamacharya was teacher to K. Pattabhi Jois, TKV Desikachar and BKS. Iyengar, who subsequently became founders of the Ashtanga-Vinyasa, Viniyoga and Iyengar yoga schools. Swami Sivananda was at the origin of the Integral Yoga Institute and others. All ancient authorities on the yoga tradition discuss and affirm the practice of ahimsa, non-violence or non-harming, as an integral and indispensable part to yoga.

“Without following ahimsa, one cannot claim to be following the yoga of Patanjali or of any other of ancient India’s liberation-based spiritual traditions”, says Edwin Bryant, professor of Hinduism at Rutgers University. “Not only is the practice of non-violence indispensable but also a non-negotiable preliminary ingredient of spiritual life.” Arguably the most influential literature about yoga consists of Patanjali’s Yoga-sutras, the Bhagavad Gita, and Hatha Yoga Pradipika of Svamarama.

Patanjali’s Yoga-sutras, considered the most important philosophical work about yoga practice, prescribed five yamas, ethical guidelines on how to discipline our human mind to ultimately attain the goal of yoga - realisation of oneness. These five yamas are non-violence, truthfulness, refraining from stealing, celibacy and renunciation of unnecessary possessions. Ahimsa, the first yama is seen as the most important of the five.

In one of Hinduism’s most important text, the Bhagavad Gita, which represents the cradle of Bhakti yoga, the practice of ahimsa is defined as necessary to reach a state of goodness, passion and ignorance. The text explicitly gives dietary recommendations by advising consumption of sattvic food such as fruits and vegetables as they promote health, vitality, strength and longevity. On the other hand, any bitter, salty and sour food, such as meat, fish and alcohol are considered causes for pain, disease and discomfort. Stale, overcooked and contaminated foods are to be avoided.

Bhagavad Gita’s dietary guidelines have survived until today, with many contemporary yogis following this type of vegetarian diet. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika of Svamarama, known to be the oldest manual on Hatha yoga, recommends avoiding fish, meat and other foods that are not ‘salutary’.

## Personal choice

Ultimately, the question whether yogis should follow a vegetarian diet, is a personal choice. And even passionate advocates of vegetarianism and yoga scholars remind us that in accordance with the teachings of yoga, no one should be judged for his choice - whether you go meatless or enjoy a steak here and there. Considering the evidence of ancient yoga philosophy, it seems, however, undeniable that going veggie is mandatory if one wants to remain true to the teachings of yoga. ॐ

# Yoga and vegetarianism

## Three major yoga traditions and their view on vegetarianism



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## Ashtanga

Ashtanga yoga technique teaches practitioners to work on the spiritual through the physical. Ashtanga yoga is a strenuous exercise routine of six series of postures, with the first group called the Primary Series. The goal is to cleanse the physical body from toxins, induced through food, environment and emotional states. Students practice the same exercises, until they have mastered each of them. It is believed that the increasing awareness of their bodies and the effort of strenuous exercising help them to transition to a vegetarian diet. Believing in direct experience instead of theory, Ashtanga yoga allows students then to become more aware and cautious of what they eat and how they live.

## Iyengar

The founder of Iyengar yoga, BKS Iyengar, considered a vegetarian diet and moderate eating habits a necessity to practice yoga and the essential step towards non-violence and spiritual enlightenment. Learning on the Bhagavad Gita teachings, Iyengar believed that sattvic food should be preferred to sour, bitter, salty, pungent or stale food, with the goal to achieve health, strength, energy and long life.

## Jivamukti

Jivamukti yoga, created in 1984 by Sharon Gannon and David Life, stands for a rigorous practice of physical, spiritual and ethical exercises with strong advocacy for veganism, animal rights, environmentalism and social activism. “Non-harming is essential to the yogi, because it creates the kind of karma that leads to eternal joy and happiness”, so states Sharon Gannon in her book ‘Yoga and Vegetarianism’. Compassion is an “essential ingredient of ahimsa,” she says. To Gannon, eating a vegetarian diet will cause the least harm to the planet and all creatures.



# A short history of vegetarianism

**Antiquity:** The practice of vegetarianism can be traced back to antiquity. Pythagoras of Samos who lived towards the end of the 6th century BC, was not only known as philosopher and mathematician, but also as the founder of a religious movement called Pythagoreanism. Pythagoreans believed that souls would migrate into the bodies of other animals and hence, followed a vegetarian diet. Living by a “Pythagorean diet” was for long time after the description for anyone who avoided consumption of meat or fish.

Meanwhile in Asia, meat-free eating habits were an important part of Buddhists, Hindus or Jainists. It is said that Asoka, the Indian emperor who reigned between 265 and 238 BC, became a Buddhist after experiencing cruelty and suffering in battles. Under his kingdom, he gave up on armed conquests and ended animal sacrifices.

**Renaissance:** During the era of renaissance, Pythagorean thoughts became once again influential in Europe thanks to the rediscovery of ancient classical philosophy. Leonardo Da Vinci who lived in the 15th century, was said to be a vegetarian.

**Enlightenment:** In the period of Enlightenment, British philosopher John Locke campaigned for animals as intelligent feeling creatures and raised moral objections against the mistreatment of animals. Other great philosophers of the Enlightenment era such as Voltaire and Rousseau also questioned man’s inhumanity to animals.

**Modern age:** In Great Britain, a Reverend named William Cowherd established the Bible Christian Church in Salford in 1809 where he preached his followers to abstain from eating meat and drinking alcohol. Cowherd’s thoughts are today considered philosophical basis that led to the foundation of the Vegetarian Society. This British charity founded in 1847, encourages the spreading of the practice of vegetarianism and to this day campaigns for the adoption of animal-free diet and lifestyle.