


First, Cause No Harm: Opening to Ahimsa

by Nityda Gessel

Opening Note: All are welcome to read this essay and I hope all who read it do benefit. I've specifically written this essay for our community of TCYM trainees and practitioners to supplement the content offered in the 25-hour trauma-conscious yoga training, specifically our first module on Yoga's History and Origins from a decolonization perspective.

In this essay I touch on yogic philosophy and the practice of ahimsa, the interconnectedness of oppressions, animal agriculture, environmental racism, climate change, food justice, food agency, and more. A little known fact about me is that I received a certificate in holistic health coaching from the Institute of Integrative Nutrition prior to becoming a somatic trauma therapist and I have a passion for holistic approaches to healing, food justice and the interconnectedness of social activism concerns. May this essay be of benefit. Jai!

 Nityda

Yoga is a state of being. It's a way of showing up in the world more awake, more connected, more loving, more free. Yoga is also the path we take to achieve this ultimate state of being. It's the practices and actions we engage in to help us achieve a more liberated state.

Ahimsa is the South Asian spiritual practice of non-harming, founded upon the wisdom that we are interconnected with all sentient beings, and that all sentient beings seek happiness, love and freedom, as we do. Ahimsa is one of these practices that is integral to the path of spiritual evolution and awakening. When most Western yogis think of ahimsa, they think of *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. Within this sacred text (estimated to have been commenced in the 2nd century BCE), Sage Patanjali classifies what he calls the Eight Limbs of Yoga. The Eight Limbs of Yoga are as follows:



The yamas are the first limb of Patanjali’s eight limb path. The word “yama,” is a Sanskrit word that translates to English as “restraint,” and the yamas, as a group, relate to the ethical standards of practice. Ahimsa, non-violence or non-harming is the first of the yamas.

It’s important to note that there are three main dharma traditions (practice lineages) in India. These three dharma traditions pre-dated Patanjali and he was highly influenced by all three of them. They are Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Core teachings from all three dharma lineages have informed the threads of wisdom that make up *The Yoga Sutras*. Ahimsa is a practice that is fundamental to and at the heart of all three dharma traditions.

The *Rig Veda*, the oldest vedic text, one of the oldest texts of human history and the earliest written account of Sanskrit, references ahimsa, advising that “all living creatures be seen with a friendly eye and all those we encounter be treated with benevolence¹.” This loving kindness is to be extended not only to other humans, but to all sentient beings, which includes non-human animals.

The longest epic poem ever written, *The Mahabharata* (which contains within it *The Bhagavad Gita*), is a sacred treasure of Hinduism written in the 4th century BCE. Within this epic, ahimsa is identified as the highest virtue. It is for this reason that Hindus are typically vegetarians.

Buddhists believe in non-violence and our interconnectedness with all living and nonliving things, including animals, and place ahimsa as number one of their five precepts

¹ https://yoga-iyengar.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AHIMSA_ENGLISH.pdf

(commitments). The Buddha taught his disciples to respect animals as sentient beings and that animals should not be killed for human pleasure, entertainment or worldly gain.

Of all three dharmas, it is Jainism that places the deepest emphasis on ahimsa. While less well-known to Westerners than Buddhism and Hinduism, Jainism is its own rich wisdom-tradition founded by Mahavira (c. 599 - 527 BC). In Jainism there is a saying, “ahimsā paramo dharmah,” meaning “non-violence is the highest virtue.” For Jains, it is the practice of ahimsa that is the key to liberation.

Jains view all life as sacred and believe that plants, animals and insects, and even the elements such as air and water have their own beautiful souls. Jains have a deep reverence for the soil microbiome and avoid eating root vegetables so as not to disturb it. Jains have a practice of stopping to bow and apologize, after they have walked from point A to point B, to any insects, plants or animals they may have unintentionally harmed along the way. An annual holiday called Paryushan, is a time for Jains to practice Pratikramana, the practice of asking for forgiveness for any harm they have done all year, twice daily.

Recognizing that it is impossible to cause no harm, these three dharma traditions of India promote ahimsa as the aspiration to be of as little harm to other sentient beings and to the earth as possible, as we navigate the path of our own liberation. *The practice of ahimsa in all three lineages is informed by an understanding of our rich interconnectedness and a deep reverence for all sentient beings, and thus amongst all three, followers practice vegetarianism, if not veganism*²

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As informed by all three of the dharmas, when Patanjali wrote about ahimsa in the *Yoga Sutras*, the adherence to a vegetarian diet was an inherent understanding, integral to the practice of ahimsa. At times, contemporary Western yoga teachers will emphasize not harming oneself when they refer to the practice of ahimsa.

Naturally, when we harm others, either intentionally or unintentionally, it is because there is harm happening within that we are knowingly or unknowingly inflicting upon ourselves. We cannot separate self from other. Yet, as Jivamukti co-founder Sharon Gannon explains, if Patanjali was talking about non-harming of self when he referred to ahimsa, he would have made it a niyama as opposed to a yama³.

It is not unlike Westerners to take teachings from another culture and distort them to serve

² Many modern day practitioners of all three lineages practice veganism as opposed to vegetarianism due to the contemporary state of animal agriculture and its himsic (violent) impacts, which we will discuss later in this essay. It is also important to note that the cow is seen as sacred in India and there are some cows that live on sanctuaries, who are brought to religious ceremonies like puja and are treated as holy beings and this is very different from the lives of cows raised within animal agriculture settings (including those identified as “free-range” by Western standards). However, the dairy industry in India and other parts of Asia, is also problematic, as it is in the West. I highly recommend Yamini Narayanan’s book: *Mother cow, Mother India: A multispecies politics of dairy in India* for more.

³ <https://jivamuktivyoga.com/fotm/ahimsa-2/>

their personal cultural needs, likes or dislikes. It is perhaps human nature and a bias that we all must awaken to. Yet, if we only focus on non-harming ourselves and neglect to look at how we are impacting others, we miss what the yogic teachings are all about. These teachings come from an Indigenous South Asian worldview where the understanding of oneness or interconnectedness was paramount.

The yamas refer to how we can ethically relate *outwardly, toward society*. As the yogic path is a path with the ultimate goal of moksha, liberation, Patanjali and the three dharmic paths of India each, are inviting us to look at our outward impact and ask ourselves the question, “How can I liberate others from my problematic ways of being?” “What are the unjust or counterproductive ways in which I am relating to the world?” And yes, it takes a good degree of healthy ego-strength (a healthy sense of self) to be able to hold ourselves accountable without degrading ourselves. When this healthy ego-strength is not available, then we may have to first focus on healing our own wounds- taking ownership of the maladaptive patterns, behaviors and ways of being we are carrying that don’t serve us, and then look at how these same ways of being negatively impact others in our lives⁴.

Dharma teacher, Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati, sums up succinctly, the message behind these teachings: “First, cause no harm⁵.” Patanjali is saying that before we come to our asana practice, before we sit to practice pranayama or meditate, that we can first take stock of our lives and the ways in which we want to suffer less and contribute to less suffering in this world. *This is a prerequisite; preliminary on this journey*. We must examine our relationship with other sentient beings and the earth. We must question our habitual patterns and ways of being. We can be bold enough to take a look at how we perhaps consciously or unconsciously are contributing to unnecessary suffering on this planet. We have the agency to plant the seeds for change, and shift our behaviors to align with our deepest soul values. This in and of itself is liberative.

On trauma

The Western approach to discomfort and dis-ease is one of treatment and prescription. We're in the business of waiting until there is a problem and treating the problem with a pill, a protocol, a practice, a hospitalization, a surgery, etcetera. This serves a system of capitalism very well, but how well does it serve *us*?

⁴ These recurring maladaptive patterns, behaviors or ways of being are called samskaras in yoga.

⁵ Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati-

<https://podcasts.apple.com/mt/podcast/first-cause-no-harm-ahimsa-of-yoga-vedanta-meditation/id160782983?i=1000021726724>

Eastern and Indigenous⁶ approaches, while they absolutely do treat, are far more holistic and preventative. A preventative and holistic approach says, “let’s create a balanced internal and external environment so that disease is ideally not a factor in the first place.”

As Western yoga practitioners and helping professionals, we’re likely interested in marrying East and West- we can take a holistic, preventative framework and also explore methods for treatment should they be necessary. Sometimes we may come to a trauma-conscious yoga or somatic therapy training, unconsciously, with the Western-minded “treatment mindset.” We may think, “I have trauma,” or “my clients have trauma,” let me learn this [Trauma-Conscious Yoga Method®](#) as a means to help myself or my clients resolve their trauma. And this is not wrong. TCYM and other trauma-informed yoga and somatic models are highly effective for resolving trauma and increasing overall well-being.

However yoga is a rich science and when its many elements are applied, we can actually prevent future distress, disease, and even avoid some traumas⁷. This modality is as much preventative medicine as it is treatment.

To consider prevention, we adopt a holistic approach. And with this holistic approach we begin to consider factors like lifestyle and diet and how creating shifts in these spaces may open us up to experiencing less stress, trauma and disease while feeling more at peace and free in our lives. *There is a sad irony when we invest so much time, energy and resources on trauma healing education and practice, to only put trauma back into our bodies multiple times a day based on our food choices.*

When we choose to eat the flesh or reproductive parts, meaning milk or eggs, of a once sentient animal, we are putting trauma into our system. Animals, again, are sentient beings. We, as human beings, are animals. Non-human animals, much like us, desire love and connection. They have an intelligence all their own. They value their families. Mama animals birth and instinctively love, protect and care for their young. They desire to keep their lives. They desire to keep their families together. They seek happiness and freedom the same as we do.

There is no sentient being that we will ever eat that wanted to die for us and our pleasure. There are no animals out there voluntarily sacrificing themselves so that we can eat them. Every animal that we eat, has died while fighting for its life.

And while the meat and dairy industries, multi-billion dollar industries that have colonized our psyches and how we view animals, have conditioned us to believe that maybe these

⁶ When I use the term “Indigenous” in this paper, I am referring to the first, native peoples located in any part of the world- that includes Afrika, South America, etc, not only what is now known as the United States.

⁷ Yoga gives us the resources to expand our nervous system so that we can let more in without going into a trauma response of fight/flight or shutdown.

animals were happy to sacrifice their lives for us (take the Starfish tuna image of the happy tuna just waiting to chat with you about how good its flesh is going to taste), when we think about it for a second, we know this simply isn't true. This is not how survival and the drive to live work.

When we choose to eat animals, we are consuming the flesh of a once sentient being whose final moments were filled with terror and a fight-or-flight hyperarousal response.

We are then putting that fight-or-flight, trauma and energy, in the form of a dead animal, into our bodies. What does this do to our energetic vibration? What impact might this have on our prana (life-force)?

How is this impacting us on a physical level? An emotional level? A psychological level? A spiritual level?

This might be a time to pause for somatic awareness or reflection. Please take the time if you'd like it and return when you're ready

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What is this human body even? Patanjali was a dualist. His system was informed by the belief that we must be liberated from this body, and the eight limb path was a way to achieve that liberation. The progression from Patanjali's dual system of thought - "we must be liberated from the confines of this body," shifted to a more non-dualist framework that said, "no, actually, we can be liberated *within* this body. The body too, like all things, is an expression of universal truth and consciousness." Next, we shift to an even more radical framework with tantra and its non-dualist expression. *Tantra says that not only can we be liberated in this body, but the body itself is a vehicle for our liberation.*

I personally believe this assertion and I deeply align with tantra. I have an inkling that the majority of the Trauma-Conscious Yoga Institute community also resonates with this paradigm shift: *the body is a vehicle for liberation. This is the underlying message behind trauma healing.* The body holds the wisdom we need to heal and resolve trauma. *We can approach and befriend it and free trauma from it, not despite it, but through it. The body is intelligent and the vessel for which our awakening can transpire.*

Yet, when we pollute our body with the byproducts of unnecessary suffering, our body-mind will never be free. We will continue to feel confined inside a vessel with the potential to liberate, but which is instead being used as a dumping ground for death and disease.



“Most people don’t think about the fact that they’re eating animals. When they’re eating a steak or eating a chicken, most people don’t think about the tremendous suffering that those animals endure simply to become food products to be consumed by humans.”

- Angela Davis

✧ *All injustices are interconnected*

When we eat animal flesh or reproductive parts, we compartmentalize and exile the part of us that knows, to soothe our cognitive dissonance. There is a part of us that knows something unethical, inhumane, perhaps downright disgusting is occurring, but we don’t wish to think about it, are scared to look, or feel that we don’t have the time for “one more thing,” so we lock this suspecting part of us away and go on eating the way we are accustomed to- the way “everyone else” does.

Perhaps a part of us has internalized speciesism⁸, as we have been conditioned to do, and we thus uphold the notion that the human species is superior to other species and therefore our tastes, desires and happiness matter more, and so we can push on and avoid dealing with the cognitive dissonance that is creating so much suffering inside and out. Or we say, “There are too many human rights violations going on for me to be concerned with animals,” neglecting to recognize that all oppressions are interwoven and speciesism will get us nowhere.

Sitting down to eat amidst a fog of denial, neglecting to identify the ways in which animals have suffered on their tormentous journey to our plate, we neglect to consider the further implications of that suffering- the ripple effect. *All injustices are interconnected*. Animal suffering is not without human suffering, is not without the suffering of the earth and the planet. All the information we could ever want is available to us online, if we are courageous enough to look. And it’s only by looking that we’ll awaken.

Case in point: North Carolina, the legacy of slavery, and environmental racism

North Carolina, historically one of many involuntary dwelling places for millions of enslaved

⁸ A term coined by Richard Ryder in 1970.

Africans, continues to have a large Black demographic today. Eastern North Carolina is home to a large number of low-income Brown and Black folx, and not coincidentally, it's also home to a plethora of "hog operations," aka pig farms or concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFO's), that crowd millions of pigs together in despicable conditions. *Pig farms, it turns out, are disproportionately located in low-income, communities of Black, Indigenous and People of the Global Majority (BIPGM)*^{9,10,11,12}.

Pig farms are a cesspool of suffering; of waste, disease and toxic greenhouse gas emissions. As it's highlighted in the groundbreaking documentary, *They're Trying to Kill Us*, "North Carolina's pigs alone produce the waste equivalent of 60,000,000 people. Enough feces and urine to fill 15,000 olympic swimming pools every year- 660,000 gallons per pool"^{13,14,15}.

Duplin County, NC is one such example where the multi-billion dollar brand, Smithfield foods, the company that produces Nathan's Famous Hot Dogs and Healthy Ones cold cuts is located. The residents most impacted by the Smithfield Foods operation in Duplin County are low-income Black folx, whose ancestors, once enslaved, bought the land following emancipation.

Centuries later, Smithfield Foods comes and sets up these pig farms of over 10 million pigs crowded into small, caged areas. The consequence to these hogs is devastating. The consequence to the environment is that over 10 billion gallons of waste is produced, emitting toxic fumes such as hydrogen sulfide, ammonia and methane. The consequences to the residents of Duplin County are just as lethal as they are for the pigs, it's just that their death often, but not always, is a slower one¹⁶.

Fact: Animals confined in concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFO's) produce 44 times more waste than humans and virtually none of it is treated^{17,18,19}.

⁹ As a note, I use the term Black, Indigenous and People of the Global Majority, further referenced as BIPGM throughout this paper. PGM is another way of saying people of color, but is a more radical term that decenters whiteness.

¹⁰ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1637958/>

¹¹ https://www.facingsouth.org/sites/default/files/wing_hogs_ej_paper.pdf

¹² <https://www.theyretryingtokillus.com/fact-sheet>

¹³ <https://www.seattletimes.com/news/water-air-issues-heighten-clashes-over-huge-pig-farms/>

¹⁴

<https://www.ewg.org/news-insights/news-release/2018/09/will-hurricane-florence-flood-nc-factory-farms-and-manure-pits#.W5meeS2ZPUJ>

¹⁵ <https://www.theyretryingtokillus.com/fact-sheet>

¹⁶ Documentary: *The Smell of Money*

¹⁷ <https://iwaponline.com/jwh/article/8/4/646/31342/Managing-waste-from-confined-animal-feeding>

¹⁸

<https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1122&context=wmelp>

¹⁹ <https://www.theyretryingtokillus.com/fact-sheet>

Fact: BIPGM experience 63% more pollution than they produce²⁰.

Fact: African Americans are three more times likely to die from pollution²¹.

There is more. The residents of Duplin County are literally getting sprayed with shit. Yes, you read that right. To get rid of all the pig feces for these 10 million pigs, the farmers have chosen to spray the feces back onto the ground with giant sprayers. Mind you, some of the residents live less than 50 feet from these pig farms. They hear the screams and squeals of pigs tortured, taking in that vicarious trauma. *They see the piles of massacred pig bodies before they are trucked away to be further butchered so that affluent folx can have bacon with their Sunday morning bloody mary's.* They report breathing in the toxic fumes- their nostrils burning, smelling it on their clothes, and literally getting sprayed with it when they walk outside. The level of degradation is abhorrent.

Investigators and researchers have taken swabs of the insides of the residents' homes and found pig feces everywhere, from kitchen counters, to beds and dressers, to children's toys. There is no escape for these residents. The rates of asthma and life threatening health conditions are through the roof in this community. Cancer rates are alarming. It's not uncommon for the elders to be hooked up to ventilators. Eric Garner's (rest in power) last words, "I can't breathe," take on renewed meaning for these residents who recognize their life spans as limited. "And no one seems to care," they share.

This type of public health crisis would never be tolerated in an affluent, white community. This is environmental racism and it's directly linked to animal agriculture, animal torture and the climate crisis.

Smithfield Foods is a huge producer. And the others, Tyson, Purdue, etcetera, are no better if not worse. If you eat "meat," at some point, you are likely eating Smithfield Foods. And so I ask, "Is this liberation?"

What's happening in North Carolina happens all over the United States and in other countries as well. This is just one case example of the devastating ripple effects of animal agriculture and the interconnectedness of injustices.

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The human rights violations that occur in connection with animal agriculture are far too many for this one essay, but I do want to touch briefly on slaughterhouses. It is again, low-income Black, Indigenous, and People of the Global Majority (BIPGM) that are most negatively impacted by slaughterhouse operations. Slaughterhouse workers are commonly

²⁰ <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1818859116>

²¹

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/02/the-trump-administration-finds-that-environmental-racism-is-real/554315/>

undocumented immigrants, with fewer rights and resources than the majority of us. The New Roots Institute reports that “an estimated 38% of these slaughterhouse workers were born outside of the U.S., and an unknown percentage of those are undocumented immigrants²².” There is also a connection between human trafficking and slaughterhouse work.

There have been former slaughterhouse workers who have reported what a day on the job was like: a sweet, affectionate pig, in a cold, dark room, nuzzling up against them in the morning, and hours later the same worker is responsible for taking the animal to the kill floor. The trauma these workers experience day in and day out, working in conditions that resemble a horror movie, attempting to avoid connecting with these loving, sentient creatures, is indescribable. Imagine each day, if you're unfortunate enough to work on the kill floor, spending your entire day, killing and killing and killing innocent animals that really just want love and freedom.


It's of no surprise to any of us here that these workers have high rates of PTSD, anxiety and depression. There has also been a link made by research, between slaughterhouse work and antisocial behavior, crime, sexual deviant behavior and intimate partner violence²³. Again, all of this trauma is spreading through low-income communities of the global majority.

Isn't it wild to think that when a child kills animals we fear they'll become a sociopath, but we expect other humans to kill animals for us day in and day out so we can eat them?

I mean really....what the fuck is going on?

Let's pause. An invitation here to pause and check in with your body. What's happening? What do you need?

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 *My journey*

I grew up in a home with a father who studied raja yoga and *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, as well as Buddhism. We were taught to never kill a spider, and to this day, I never have. But this loving kindness toward arachnids did not extend to all animals. While we had unusual pets, like rats, we ate meat, and little emphasis was put on health (although I developed my own interest in health and nutrition in middle and high school). I wasn't one of those kids who made the connection that I was eating animals and proceeded to radically denounce chicken nuggets to my parents. My awakening came a bit later, in my early twenties.

I went vegetarian in 2007. I was embarking on my trauma healing journey after leaving a

²² <https://www.newrootsinstitute.org/articles/violence-translating-outside-the-slaughterhouse>

²³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/15248380211030243>

professional ballet career and I was looking to heal my mind, body, heart and spirit in a holistic way. I was preparing to begin a yoga practice, as I had signed up for a semester-long yoga class that met three times a week at my university in Norfolk, VA. I may have already had an inkling that yogic philosophy promoted vegetarianism. I planned on trying out vegetarianism for a week but I felt so amazing that I decided to stick with it. I figured I would probably try going vegan at some point, already very open to the idea but lacking the true knowledge of the impacts of animal agriculture and specifically the dairy industry.

One day, a year later in 2008, I decided it was time. I started perusing through PETA's (people for the ethical treatment of animals) website. Their headquarters were actually located just around the corner from my apartment and by this time I had become a newly certified yoga teacher and had a couple vegan yogi friends (literally two, one of whom worked for PETA). I spent hours on that website. I looked through the pages about fishing, the pages about farm-raised cows and pigs, the pages about dairy cows and egg-laying hens, the pages about animal experimentation and animals used for entertainment in zoos and circuses.

I learned of the horrific things that happen to animals on the way to and alongside their confinement- the horrors few speak about. The trauma that most people refuse to investigate. I finally decided to click on a short film, voice-overed by Alec Baldwin called *Meet Your Meat*. Well, as if what I had learned in the previous hours wasn't enough, this video exposed undercover footage of a slaughterhouse. It was horrific, devastating, unbearable to watch but I didn't turn away. I wanted this awakening. I couldn't participate in this system. That was it for me.

Even already being a vegetarian, learning the ways in which dairy cows and their babies suffer- these beautiful sentient beings that form relational bonds and value mother-child attachments just as we do; alongside learning about egg-laying hens, I began to understand why people go vegan as opposed to vegetarian. That was the day I made the vow.

It has been a journey and I have made mistakes. And as much as I value ahimsa, I attempt to be cognizant of the ways in which I may unintentionally judge those who have not looked, who remain unknowing and who don't practice ahimsa in the exact ways that I do. *For me, this practicing of ahimsa through meditation and svadhyaya²⁴, through diet, and through peaceful activism has been a truly liberating experience.*

Raising a child (soon to be two children) who in her toddler years, understands why we choose coconut milk ice cream over dairy has been illuminating and empowering and allowed for its own level of transformation (children really value the explanation, and that takes time, but once they get it, they get it- "we don't take the cow's milk away from the baby cow who nature intended it for. We don't contribute to the separation of families who long to be together or the immediate slaughter of male calves who can't produce milk"). My three-year old daughter is an

²⁴ Svadhyaya is the yogic practice of self-study.

aware, thriving vegan. A loving, nurturing soul.

I know the impact I want to have on this world and on my children. And it is liberative to sit down and eat three times a day without having to do mental gymnastics to justify to myself why I am eating what I am eating. I can eat and feel connected to the food and to the earth. When I sit and eat, I say thank you to the animals, not because I am revering them for sacrificing their life for me (pretending that they wanted to die for my pleasure) but because I am grateful that these beautiful creature's walk amongst us, and I know that as a vegan I am saving the lives of at least 365 animals each year, despite there being 9-billion animals raised and slaughtered for food each year within the United States alone²⁵²⁶.

I do not feel that my journey is the model journey or that your journey needs to be anything like mine. You choose your path. Each of our journey's is unique and beautiful. Thank you for letting me share a glimmer of mine.

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 *Compassion for your journey*

The meat and dairy industries are multibillion dollar industries that have shaped our society and our beliefs, and that have held authority over the nutrition information we receive vs what has been withheld. These industries have also been keen in helping us to distance ourselves from the fact that we are actually eating animals when we eat meat- after all, a chicken nugget looks nothing like a chicken and a burger doesn't at all resemble a cow.

We have all been conditioned to believe that we need meat and dairy to be healthy. We believe that meat is a vital source of nutrients. Yet, when we eat meat, we are eating an animal, and animals are not a source of nutrients, in and of themselves. We, as human beings, are animals, and we all have known someone with a nutritional deficiency or perhaps we've had one ourselves. We have all known someone who is iron deficient, for example. The animals we consume for food: pigs, cows, chickens, also, of course, can have nutrient deficiencies. Animals are not a source of nutrients- they get their nutrients from the foods they eat. *In the case of pigs, cows, and chickens (the main animals humans in the West eat) they all get their nutrients from plants.*

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https://aldf.org/focus_area/farmed-animals/#:~:text=There's%20an%20estimated%209%20billion,perfectly%20legal%2C%20under%20current%20law.

²⁶ A common argument amongst meat eaters goes something like, "but if we didn't eat all of these animals they would overpopulate our civilization." What these well-intentioned folk don't know is that a large majority of these animals come into existence via artificial insemination of non-consenting mother animals- therefore these animal lives are created, simply so they can be killed and meat eaters can eat them. This is undue suffering that is traumatic for animals (human and non-human) and which is wreaking havoc on the environment.

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When we choose to eat the animal to get the nutrients we need as opposed to just eating the plant, we are contributing to an unspeakable amount of suffering- that of animals, other humans, and the planet. This extends to our own suffering.

The world health organization (WHO) has classified bacon, sausage and deli meats as carcinogens²⁷²⁸²⁹. Due to the bacteria in dead animal flesh, when we eat it, within minutes, the body experiences inflammation that stiffens and paralyzes the arteries³⁰³¹³². Dr. Michael Gregor explains that “by age 10, most kids have fatty streaks on their arteries- the first stage of atherosclerosis, leading to heart attacks and strokes³³³⁴³⁵.” Researchers are finding that 70% of deaths from or related to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancers, stroke, heart disease, and dementia, are related to lifestyle choices rather than genetics and are therefore entirely preventable³⁶³⁷³⁸.

The leading cause of death in the United States is heart disease. *A vegan diet, is the only diet shown to not only slow heart disease but to actually reverse it³⁹⁴⁰*. People are going off diabetes medications, healing their rheumatoid arthritis, healing their gut, and reversing all types of illnesses when making the switch to a whole-foods, plant-based diet. It seems that even if we were going to appropriate the teaching of ahimsa and use it to only refer to non-harming of self, this single lifestyle choice would still be a valuable avenue.

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The majority of the folk I know, myself and my daughter included, thrive on a vegan diet. Check out the documentary, *Gamechangers*, to learn how a growing number of pro-athletes including the heavy-lifting champion of the world, Patrik Baboumian, thrive with this way of

²⁷ https://www.iarc.who.int/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/pr240_E.pdf

²⁸ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanonc/article/PIIS1470-2045\(15\)00444-1/abstract](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanonc/article/PIIS1470-2045(15)00444-1/abstract)

²⁹

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/10/26/451211964/bad-day-for-bacon-processed-red-meats-cause-cancer-says-who>

³⁰

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/D718D5E9F16F2F9E4075D32373C874BA/S0007114510003004a.pdf/div-class-title-the-capacity-of-foodstuffs-to-induce-innate-immune-activation-of-human-monocytes-span-class-italic-in-vitro-span-is-dependent-on-food-content-of-stimulants-of-toll-like-receptors-2-and-4-div.pdf>

³¹ <https://nutritionfacts.org/video/dead-meat-bacteria-endotoxemia/>

³² Documentary- *What the Health?*

³³ [https://ajcn.nutrition.org/article/S0002-9165\(23\)06872-7/fulltext](https://ajcn.nutrition.org/article/S0002-9165(23)06872-7/fulltext)

³⁴ <https://nutritionfacts.org/video/heart-disease-starts-in-childhood/>

³⁵ Documentary- *What the Health?*

³⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/overview/>

³⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4241367/>

³⁸ Documentary- *What the Health?*

³⁹ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/the-right-plant-based-diet-for-you>

⁴⁰ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/188274>

living. However, there are people that have tried a vegetarian or vegan diet and decided it wasn't for them.

This is your journey and it is no one's right to tell you what is right for you. I will say though that when we understand the plethora of negative impacts and unnecessary suffering that are a direct consequence of eating animals, and when we understand that meat and dairy are actually addictive, inflammation producing and can even be carcinogenic, then it's not unfathomable that *when we give up meat and/or meat, dairy and eggs, some of our bodies will respond with detox symptoms.* These symptoms can include extreme fatigue or exhaustion, headaches, brain fog, etc., much like when detoxing off drugs or alcohol.

If we can align with the understanding that animals, in and of themselves, are not a source of nutrients, paired with the recognition of the negative impacts of eating animals and animal products, we might consider giving veganism more than a single go. There are so many ways to "eat vegan," or vegetarian and I have found that when focusing on whole foods and including a large variety of whole plant proteins, I feel better on a vegan diet than I ever had prior. We have to find which way of eating vegan works for us. And again, *this is your journey, and ultimately, you get to choose whether you go vegan or do not, and what you put on your plate at mealtime.* I am here merely to be a vehicle for information and the truth as I understand it, as a human being on a spiritual journey who wishes to uplift the collective.

—

"Humane meat" and the environment

I am not here to tell you what to believe, in fact that would be contrary to the practice of ahimsa. I fully understand that some of us truly believe that we need meat to thrive, or we simply want it. Interestingly enough, a study in 2008 was conducted where participants were given animal meat and then plant-based meat and asked which they preferred. The majority of the participants attested to preferring the "real meat." Only thing is, they didn't know that the researchers actually switched the samples halfway through so that (1) not only were people saying they liked the "real meat" option better when it was actually the plant-based alternative, but (2) participants couldn't really taste the difference⁴¹. This perhaps sheds some light on how many of us might hold "meat eater" as part of our identity or have a psychological bias toward eating meat and against being a vegetarian or vegan.

A lot of us attempt to soothe our cognitive dissonance around eating animals by looking for labels: "grass-fed," "hormone free," "free range," "pasture raised" or "cage free." The same big companies, like Smithfield, Tyson and Purdue, who confine and "maintain" their animals in horrific, torturous conditions, also own smaller companies with different names who use these euphemistic labels.

⁴¹ Our hen house podcast, episode 716

These companies know we are compassionate people and that a growing number of people are recognizing the horrific and unhealthy conditions under which animals are kept, not to mention the toll animal agriculture takes on the environment. So they use these labels to keep us happy, keep us eating meat, keep us from feeling guilt, and keep us from making the really hard choice to stop eating animals.

There was a point in history when some people discussed abolishing slavery, where others countered with more “humane” treatment of those enslaved. *Is there really such a thing as humane treatment of an enslaved individual who desires happiness, love, connection, joy and freedom*⁴²?



“The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than Black people were made for whites or women for men.”

- Alice Walker

What’s ironic is that “grass fed” cows actually use more environmental resources and have a significantly more negative impact on climate change. *Studies have found that farmed, grass fed cows contribute to 50% more greenhouse gas emissions than cows raised in CAFO’s.* So from a climate and planet perspective, by eating grass fed we are doing even greater damage to the planet than if we ate cows raised on factory farms.

Meanwhile, one study found that *vegans contribute to 75% less greenhouse gas emissions than meat eaters*⁴³? Another study by Nathan Pelletier actually found that *replacing all meat with plant-based protein sources, decreases greenhouse gas emissions from protein creation by 96%*.⁴⁴

⁴² I know the arguments around grass-fed cows are plentiful and I am just touching the tip of the iceberg in this brief essay.

⁴³ Journal of Nature Food: [Published: 20 July 2023](https://www.nature.com/articles/s43016-023-00795-w): <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43016-023-00795-w>

⁴⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0308521X10000399>

Factory farming is the leading cause of climate change, deforestation, the overfishing crisis, water pollution, and species extinction⁴⁵⁴⁶⁴⁷⁴⁸. It was an experiment during the Industrial Revolution. Clearly it's failed miserably, but it's making some people somewhere a whole lot of money while everyone else gets sick, so here we are.

Switching to a vegan diet that honors ahimsa is one of the best things, if not the best thing, you can do for the planet, your own health and the lives of vulnerable animals and humans. And plus, as "Badass Vegan," John Lewis puts it, it's a great way to say "fuck the system (in the most peaceful way, of course)."

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 *Who's really going vegan?*

Today in America, Black Americans are the demographic with the highest rates of transitioning to veganism⁴⁹⁵⁰. In a room of Black and white folx, if only one is vegan, it's most likely to be the Black folk in the room. *What was commonly misperceived as a white movement is actually a reclamation of ancestral eating and wellness for the Black community, amidst living in a society where systemic racism persists*. Veganism is a newer word being used to describe a lifestyle embodied since the beginning of time by Indigenous people all over the world, from Afrika to Asia and beyond.

There have always been Black vegans and those of us returning to our ancestral way of eating, but today the blow up of Black veganism is a full blown civil rights movement. At its most radical it's like the community is saying, "guess what, we're not going to eat your nasty food designed to make us sick, and we won't become dependent on your prescription drugs, and we won't need your hospitals where we are subject to medical racism and premature death. We will free ourselves."



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cal-conservation/2015/oct/20/the-four-horsemen-of-the-sixt

/news/study-claims-meat-creates-half-of-all-greenhouse-ga

ng-cause-of-everything-one-industry-that-is-destroying-our-
n-environmental-law-review/

⁴⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53787329>

⁵⁰ <https://www.essence.com/lifestyle/black-americans-vegan/>

“Vegan food is soul food in its truest form. Soul food means to feed the soul. And, to me, your soul is your intent. If your intent is pure, you are pure.”

- Erykah Badu

People of all ages, gender identities, races and ethnicities are going vegan nowadays to support their own health, the health of other animals (human and non-human) and the health of the planet. For many, there is a spiritual motivation, and for those who there is not initially, there is a spiritual shift that is experienced regardless as a natural positive consequence. This way of living has the power to support one's healing holistically and elevate one's consciousness. It's a truly empowering and beautiful thing.

Recognizing privilege

Ahimsa, again, is an attitude of non-harming; the vow to commit to doing as little harm as possible. When it comes to choosing what foods we consume three or more times a day, not all of us have the privilege. There are folk living in food deserts or experiencing food apartheid⁵¹ and who do not have access to healthful food. There is a lack of transportation within these same communities or intentional social barriers, such as the rule that you can only take two bags on the bus (so assuming you actually had the time and money, you still wouldn't be able to get a full week's worth of healthy groceries to feed your family).

When we do have the privilege to eat well and we do have agency over the foods we eat, the practice of ahimsa invites us to deeply consider first, not our own liberation, but how we can liberate others (the earth, animals, other humans) from ourselves and our own attachments, samskaras, and unresolved wounds that show up in how we relate to and in the world.

I hope you'll consider all of this as food for thought and reflection. Maybe this essay will help guide your journey, maybe there are just one or two things you take from it. *If you are interested in learning more about veganism or would like to explore going plant-based, please [click here](#) for our list of resources.* I hope that this offering has been of benefit to you, to other human and

⁵¹ A term coined by food justice activist Karen Washington:

<https://seas.umich.edu/news/food-desert-vs-food-apartheid-which-term-best-describes-disparities-food-access#:~:text=Karen%20Washington%2C%20food%20justice%20advocate,wealthy%20neighborhoods%20while%20unhealthy%20food>

non-human animals, and to the planet.

♥ *Ahimsa is love*

While ahimsa and veganism are not synonyms, they are frameworks that share the same intention- to do as little harm as possible. Ahimsa, a restraint, is spoken in the negative- we are not to harm. So what is the positive reframe of ahimsa? *To love*. Both ahimsa and veganism are ultimately about love- about extending love outward and inward. We remove our biases that create separateness- it's no longer "I'll love you because you're my dog and I'll eat you because you're a pig," or "I'll love you because you're white and I'll hate you because you're Black." We remove the false hierarchy, the prejudice, the separation and open our hearts to all beings regardless of race, class, ability, or species.

What is the legacy you wish to impart on this world? What do you wish to be remembered for? I am absolutely certain that the legacy I want to leave on this world can be spoken in one, simple word: *love*.

--

✧ *A Prayer for the Future*

May we raise children who love the unloved things

The dandelion, the worms and spiderlings.

Children who sense the rose needs the thorne

And run into rain swept days the same way they run towards the sun

And when they are grown and someone has to speak for those who have no voice

May they draw upon that wilder bond, those days of tending tender things and be the ones.

- *Nicolette Sowder*

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✧ Reflection questions for svadhyaya:

1. First, I invite you to meditate and/or journal freely about what comes to mind, heart and body upon completing this essay.
2. Early on in this essay I wrote the following: “First, cause no harm⁵².’ Patanjali is saying that before we come to our asana practice, before we sit to practice pranayama or meditate, that we can first take stock of our lives and the ways in which we want to suffer less and contribute to less suffering in this world. *This is a prerequisite; preliminary on this journey.* We must examine our relationship with other sentient beings and the earth. We must question our habitual patterns and ways of being.”

I invite you to sit, pause and reflect on this and notice what’s coming up in your body. I invite you to record your observations or use a somatic practice like “empathizing with an emotion⁵³” to go deeper.

3. What resonated with you from this essay? What stood out?
4. What was activating for you or brought up conflict?
5. Are there positive shifts you’re interested in implementing or curious to explore further?

⁵² Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati-
<https://podcasts.apple.com/mt/podcast/first-cause-no-harm-ahimsa-of-yoga-vedanta-meditation/id160782983?i=1000021726724>

⁵³ A practice offered in The Trauma-Conscious Yoga Method certification training