My Turn
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The Day I Saw a Meat-Eater

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Having been born in a South Indian orthodox Hindu family, I was never told that one could live on foods of animal origin during my school days in Madras. There were then no canteens in school. We had to carry our food packets for consumption during the lunch recess. I had no exposure to the sight of persons actually eating meat until I got out of school. Our parents and grandparents told us that we will be committing acts which will invite God's wrath if we harm, let alone kill animals, for any reason except in self-defense. It deeply and unshakably put it in our minds that any animal has the same right to live in this world as we do. God had ordained that no animal can be harmed for pleasure, or on purpose, by us.

It was later, when I entered the Madras Veterinary College, that I had the real exposure, not only to my friend's actually consuming meat but also to the science of raising animals and birds exclusively for satisfying the human palate and food needs. The subject of meat inspection was part of my curriculum. Necessarily, any student of meat science had to handle meat and, in making the score card judgment of meat, he had also to taste meat and record his score. My school days and the unshakable faith and conviction imbibed in me due to the teachings of my parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, prevented me from this unpleasant act. I was lucky in that some meat-eating classmates would always oblige me by tasting meat and giving me his opinion which I would record as mine. With skill in this clandestine practice, acquired relentlessly in abundant measure, I could fudge my entry on this point even in the University examination, without any adverse result. Believe it or not, I had this way carried on successfully as a meat inspecter in the earlier part of my service, when I had to do meat inspection for three years. I also functioned quite successfully as the Government of India's Licensing Authority under the Meat Food Products Order in 1973, without tasting any meat whatsoever. I have remained a vegetarian all along.

How Hinduism helps to create in young malleable minds the virtues of vegetarianism can be seen from the instance I cite below, which is on the far end of the other side of the scale. One day, in February, 1967, in Sydney, Australia, while I was walking to my college from home after the lunch break, I saw a tiny bird sitting on the pavement and basking in the sun. I saw the bird suddenly collapse, but not die, following a gunshot sound. What I saw thereafter was a ghastly sight. A boy in his teens, toting a shot gun, walked towards the collapsed, gasping, half-alive bird, crushed it with his foot and dumped it in the roadside trash-bin. What did he achieve? I asked myself. As the logic of his action passed my comprehension, I asked him, "Why?" I was stunned by his reply, "I was practicing target shooting at tiny objects." Could there be a more barbaric way of target practice? I thought. Even in the wildest of dreams, a boy from my or my wife's background could not even imagine an act of that kind. I am convinced that vegetariansim, the backbone for which is ahimsa, non-violence, is best for human society and that Hinduism greatly helps shape people to that way of life. The lessons learned during childhood days from one's elders go a long way toward shaping one as a vegetarian. Not only that, he is also one who hesitates to kill an animal for any cause.

I am a strict vegetarian and maintain excellent health at the age of 67. So, also, is my wife, who is 60. I can say this about elderly relatives now in their 70s who have remained strict vegetarians. My mother, again a strict vegetarian, lived in good health up to 92 years of age before breathing her last on January 7, 1993. Meat is not at all essential in one's diet for maintaining good health. My wife and I enjoy excellent health and remain very active mentally and physically. So, it is really vegetarianism that we must promote-left, right and center. This will greatly help in the elimination of violence, and the ever-elusive world peace will become a reality sooner, rather than later.

Dr. S. Jayaraman, after more than thirty-six years of service in the Government of India, now lives in Madras with his wife. They have three children, all married with children of their own-all vegetarian.