

Spirituality & Community

March 2009

www.spiritualityandcommunity.com

Jarvis the Duck

Kurt Venables



Sufism
The Alchemy of Happiness
Al Ghazzali

The Awakening
Devrah Laval

Journey to Veganism
Hrvoje Butkovic

Contents

Who We Are	3
Sufism	5
The Alchemy of Happiness Al Ghazzali	
Jarvis the Duck	11
Kurt Venables	
The Awakening	12
Devrah Laval	
Journey to Veganism	15
Hrvoje Butkovic	

Who We Are

www.spiritualityandcommunity.com

Welcome! Seeking spiritual fulfillment? True happiness and mental wellness? Well, that's what we're all about. Spirituality & Community is a magazine, web site, and online community for those seeking answers to life's deepest questions. ***We are dedicated to promoting spirituality, true happiness, mental wellness, and appreciation for a diversity of spiritual beliefs.***

A New Age of Light

Our focus is spirituality, which we view as an inner search for happiness and fulfillment. We are concerned with what lies within the heart. ***We believe that within everyone lies a pure love that we call the Light or the Lord within. We believe that one must open one's heart to the Light to attain spiritual fulfillment and that only this brings true happiness and mental wellness.*** The Light is the essence of humanity. ***Ultimately, we find our way by casting our gaze inward.*** We will search this inner world over until we find our home:

***We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding***

We believe that mankind is entering a new age, an Age of Light. We see a growing spiritual crisis in the world today. Our culture has brought us unprecedented material well being, but we seem further away than ever from true spiritual wholeness. We also perceive an increase in mental health issues in our society and believe this to be linked to spiritual detachment. Many wander endlessly in search of the material gratification that will bring them happiness. Many have lost faith in religions and traditions. Others sincerely believe in traditional religions but remain unfulfilled spiritually and unhappy. Unfortunately, too many are so close-minded they refuse to ask what is missing from their lives. Yet, many hunger for spiritual wholeness and are searching for answers. ***We believe that we are entering a new age of enlightenment in which genuine spiritual progress will be made and that spiritual development depends upon a genuine appreciation for a diversity of spiritual beliefs.*** An appreciation for diversity of belief provides us with a fresh view of the beliefs of others, allows us to take from each set of beliefs that which rings true, and enables us to synthesize a personal spirituality that makes sense for each of us. When we view the beliefs of others with our hearts, we see truth shine through. We look with the highest regard to traditional beliefs and religions for guidance, and we also look forward. ***We believe that the past is not the end but the beginning.***



What We Do

Spirituality & Community produces a magazine and encompasses an online community. Both aspects serve as the basis for bringing together those who share our aspirations and beliefs, to meet each other and exchange ideas. We provide many opportunities for exploring spirituality and communicating with others:

- *Spirituality & Community magazine*
- *Features on the site*
- *Online chats* (as interest arises)

The magazine is based on a Reader's Digest® type model. It is comprised primarily of reader submitted material. It is the primary mechanism for a member to both explore spirituality and communicate his or her ideas to others. Features are also posted on the site. When interest is sufficiently high, we will hold chats online. *We sincerely hope that you will find truth within, and we wish you only the best on your own personal journey!*

Sufism

The Alchemy of Happiness (excerpts)

Al Ghazzali

Translated by Claud Field (1909)

Sufism is a mystical form of Islam. The primary focus of the Sufi is developing a love of God through devotion and worship. Al Ghazzali (1058-1111 AD) lived in Persia and is considered to be one of the most important Sufi scholars. For more, see: www.sacred-texts.com/isl/tah/index.htm.



Persian Edition of Alchemy of Happiness (1308)

Introduction

KNOW, O beloved, that man was not created in jest or at random, but marvellously made and for some great end. Although he is not from everlasting, yet he lives for ever; and though his body is mean and earthly, yet his spirit is lofty and divine. When in the crucible of abstinence he is purged from carnal passions he attains to the highest, and in place of being a slave to lust and anger becomes endued with angelic qualities. Attaining that state, he finds his heaven in the contemplation of Eternal Beauty, and no longer in fleshly delights. The spiritual alchemy which operates this change in him, like that which transmutes base metals into gold, is not easily discovered, nor to be found in the house of every old woman. It is to explain that alchemy and its methods of operation that the author has undertaken this work, which he has entitled, *The Alchemy of Happiness*. Now the treasuries of God, in which this alchemy is to be sought, are the hearts of the prophets, and he, who seeks it elsewhere will be disappointed and bankrupt on the day of judgment, when he hears the words, "We have lifted the veil from off thee, and thy sight to-day is keen."

God has sent on earth a hundred and twenty-four thousand prophets[1] to teach men the prescription of this alchemy, and how to purify their hearts from baser qualities in the crucible of abstinence. This alchemy may be briefly described as turning away from the world to God, and its constituents are four:

1. The knowledge of self.
2. The knowledge of God.
3. The knowledge of this world as it really is.
4. The knowledge of the next world as it really is.

We shall now proceed to expound these four constituents in order.

Chapter I: The Knowledge of Self

KNOWLEDGE of self is the key to the knowledge of God, according to the saying: "He who knows himself knows God,"[1] and, as it is Written in the Koran, "We will show them Our signs in the world and *in themselves*, that the truth may be manifest to them." Now nothing is nearer to thee than thyself, and if thou knowest not thyself how canst thou know anything else? If thou sayest "I know myself," meaning thy outward shape, body, face, limbs, and so forth, such knowledge can never be a key to the knowledge of God. Nor, if thy knowledge as to that which is within only extends so far, that when thou art hungry thou eatest, and when thou art angry thou attackest some one, wilt thou progress any further in this path, for the beasts are thy partners in this? But real self-knowledge consists in knowing the following things: What art thou in thyself, and from whence hast thou come? Whither art thou going, and for what purpose hast thou come to tarry here awhile, and in what does thy real happiness and misery consist? Some of thy attributes are those of animals, some of devils, and some of angels, and thou hast to find out which of these attributes are accidental and which essential. Till thou knowest this, thou canst not find out where thy real happiness lies.

...

The first step to self-knowledge is to know that thou art composed of an outward shape, called the body, and an inward entity called the heart, or soul. By "heart" I do not mean the piece of flesh situated in the left of our bodies, but that which uses all the other faculties as its instruments and servants. In truth it does not belong to the visible world, but to the invisible, and has come into this world as a traveller visits a foreign country for the sake of merchandise, and will presently return to its native land. It is the knowledge of this entity and its attributes which is the key to the knowledge of God.

...

A soul which allows its lower faculties to dominate the higher is as one who should hand over an angel to the power of a dog or a Mussalman to the tyranny of an unbeliever. The cultivation of demonic, animal, or angelic qualities results in the production of corresponding characters, which in the Day of Judgment will be manifested in visible shapes, the sensual appearing as swine, the ferocious as dogs and wolves, and the pure as angels. The aim of moral discipline is to purify the heart from the rust of passion and resentment, till, like a clear mirror, it reflects the light of God.

...

This opening of a window in the heart towards the unseen also takes place in conditions approaching those of prophetic inspiration, when intuitions spring up in the mind unconveyed through any sense-channel. The more a man purifies himself from fleshly lusts and concentrates his mind on God, the more conscious will he be of such intuitions. Those who are not conscious of them have no right to deny their reality.

...

Just as no one knows the real nature of God but God Himself, so no one knows the real nature of a prophet but a prophet. Nor is this to be wondered at, as in everyday matters we see that it is impossible to explain the charm of poetry to one whose ear is insusceptible of cadence and rhythm, or the glories of colour to one who is stone-blind. Besides mere incapacity, there are other hindrances to the attainment of spiritual truth. One of these is externally acquired knowledge. To use a figure, the heart may be represented as a well, and the five senses as five streams which are continually conveying water to it. In order to find out the real contents of the

heart these streams must be stopped for a time, at any rate, and the refuse they have brought with them must be cleared out of the well. In other words, if we are to arrive at pure spiritual truth, we must put away, for the time, knowledge which has been acquired by, external processes and which too often hardens into dogmatic prejudice.

...

Any one who will look into the matter will see that happiness is necessarily linked with the knowledge of God. Each faculty of ours delights in that for which it was created: lust delights in accomplishing desire, anger in taking vengeance, the eye in seeing beautiful objects, and the ear in hearing harmonious sounds. The highest function of the soul of man is the perception of truth; in this accordingly it finds its special delight. Even in trifling matters, such, as learning chess, this holds good, and the higher the subject-matter of the knowledge obtained the greater the delight. A man would be pleased at being admitted into the confidence of a prime minister, but how much more if the king makes an intimate of him and discloses state secrets to him!

An astronomer who, by his knowledge, can map the stars and describe their courses, derives more pleasure from his knowledge than the chess-player from his. Seeing, then, that nothing is higher than God, how great must be the delight which springs from the true knowledge of Him!

...

In this chapter we have attempted, in some degree, to expound, the greatness of man's soul. He who neglects it and suffers its capacities to rust or to degenerate must necessarily be the loser in this world and the next.

Chapter II: The Knowledge of God

IT is a well-known saying of the Prophet that "He who knows himself, knows God"; that is, by contemplation of his own being and attributes man arrives at some knowledge of God. But since many who contemplate themselves do not find God, it follows that there must be some special way of doing so. As a matter of fact, there are two methods of arriving at this knowledge, but one is so abstruse that it is not adapted to ordinary intelligences, and therefore is better left unexplained. The other method is as follows: When a man considers himself he knows that there was a time when he was non-existent, as it is written in the Koran: "Does it not occur to man that there was a time when he was nothing?" Further, he know that he was made out of a drop of water in which there was neither intellect, nor hearing, sight, head, hands, feet, etc. From this it is obvious that, whatever degree of perfection he may have arrived at, he did not make himself, nor can he now make a single hair. How much more helpless, then, was his condition when he was a mere drop of water! Thus, as we have seen in the first chapter, he finds in his own being reflected in miniature, so to speak, the power, wisdom and love of the Creator. If all the sages of the world were assembled, and their lives prolonged for an indefinite time, they could not effect any improvement in the construction of a single part of the body.

...

When a man further considers how his various wants of food, lodging, etc., are amply supplied from the storehouse of creation, he becomes aware that God's mercy is as great as His power and wisdom, as He has Himself said, "My mercy is greater than My wrath," and according to the Prophet's saying, "God is more tender to His servants than a mother to her suckling-child." Thus from his own creation man comes to know God's existence, from the wonders of his bodily frame God's power and wisdom, and from the ample provision made for his various needs God's love. In this way the knowledge of oneself becomes a key to the knowledge of God.

Not only are man's attributes a reflection of God's attributes, but the mode of existence of man's soul affords some insight into God's mode of existence. That is to say, both God and the soul are invisible, indivisible, unconfined by space and time, and outside the categories of quantity and quality; nor can the ideas of shape, colour, or size attach to them. People find it hard to form a conception of such realities as are devoid of quality and quantity, etc., but a similar difficulty attaches to the conception of our everyday feelings, such as anger, pain, pleasure, or love. They are thought-concepts, and cannot be cognised by the senses; whereas quality, quantity, etc., are sense-concepts. Just as the ear cannot take cognisance of colour, nor the eye of sound, so, in conceiving of the ultimate realities, God and the soul, we find ourselves in a region in which sense-concepts can bear no part. So much, however, we can see, that, as God is Ruler of the universe, and, being Himself beyond space and time, quantity and quality, governs things that are so conditioned, so the soul rules the body and its members, being itself invisible, indivisible, and unlocated in any special part. For how can the indivisible be located in that which is divisible? From all this we see how true is the saying of the Prophet, "God created man in His own likeness."

...

No one can understand a king but a king therefore God has made each of us a king in miniature, so to speak, over a kingdom which is an infinitely reduced copy of His own. In the, kingdom of man God's "throne" is represented by the soul, the Archangel by the heart, "the chair" by the brain, "the tablet" by the treasure-chamber of thought. The soul, itself unlocated and indivisible, governs the body as God governs the universe. In short, each of us is entrusted with a little kingdom, and charged not to be careless in the administration of it.

...

Thus, the exclamation "God is great" means that His greatness far exceeds all our powers of comprehension. Moreover, such imperfect knowledge of God as we can attain to is not a mere speculative knowledge, but must be accompanied by devotion and worship. When a man dies he has to do with God alone, and if we have to live with a person, our happiness entirely depends on the degree of affection we feel towards him. Love is the seed of happiness, and love to God is fostered and developed by worship. Such worship and constant remembrance of God implies a certain degree of austerity and curbing of bodily appetites. Not that a man is intended altogether to abolish these, for then the human race would perish. But strict limits must be set to their indulgence, and as a man is not the best judge in his own case as to what these limits should be, he had better consult some spiritual guide on the subject. Such spiritual guides are the prophets, and the laws which they have laid down under divine inspiration prescribe the limits which must be observed in these matters. He who transgresses these limits "wrongs his own soul," as it is written in the Koran.

...

Some, on the other hand, believe in God and a future life but with a weak belief. They say to themselves, "God is great and independent of us; our worship or abstinence from worship is a matter of entire indifference to Him." Their state of mind is like that of a sick man who, when prescribed a certain regime by his doctor, should say, "Well, if I follow it or don't follow it, what does it matter to the doctor?" It certainly does not matter to the doctor, but the patient may destroy himself by his disobedience. Just as surely as, unchecked sickness of body ends in bodily death, so does uncured disease of the soul end in future misery, according to the saying of the Koran, "Only those shall be saved who come to God with a sound heart."

...

A fifth class lay stress on the beneficence of God, and ignore His justice, saying to themselves, "Well, whatever we do, God is merciful." They do not consider that, though God is merciful, thousands of human beings perish miserably in hunger and disease. They know that whosoever wishes for a livelihood, or for wealth, or learning, must not merely say, "God is merciful," but must exert himself. Although the Koran says, "Every living creature's support comes from God," it is also written, "Man obtains nothing except by striving." The fact is, such teaching is really from the devil, and such people only speak with their lips and not with their heart.

Chapter VIII: The Love of God

THE love of God is the highest of all topics, and is the final aim to which we have been tending hitherto. We have spoken of spiritual dangers as they hinder the love of God in a man's heart, and we have spoken of various good qualities as being the necessary preliminaries to it. Human perfection resides in this, that the love of God should conquer a man's heart and possess it wholly, and even if it does not possess it wholly it should predominate in the heart over the love of all other things. Nevertheless, rightly to understand the love of God is so difficult a matter that one sect of theologians have altogether denied that man can love a Being who is not of his own species, and they have defined the love of God as consisting merely in obedience. Those who hold such views do not know what real religion is.

...

But those possessed of inner perception find it quite possible to love the departed great, such as the Caliphs Omar and Abu Bakr, on account of their noble qualities, though their bodies have long been mingled with the dust. Such love is directed not towards any outward form, but towards the inner character. Even when we wish to excite love in a child towards any one, we do not describe their outward beauty of form, etc., but their inner excellences.

When we apply this principle to the love of God we shall find that He alone is worthy of our love, and that, if any one loves Him not, it is because he does not know Him. Whatever we love in any one we love because it is a reflection of Him. It is for this reason that we love Muhammad, because he is the Prophet and the Beloved of God, and the love of learned and pious men is really the love of God. We shall see this more clearly if we consider what are the causes which excite love.

...

All Moslems profess to believe that the Vision of God is the summit of human felicity, because it is so stated in the Law; but with many this is a mere lip-profession which arouses no emotion in their hearts. This is quite, natural, for how can a man long for a thing of which he has no knowledge? We will endeavour your to show briefly why the Vision of God is the greatest happiness to which a man can attain.

...

But the delight of knowledge still falls short of the delight of vision, just as our pleasure in thinking of those we love is much less than the pleasure afforded by the actual sight of them. Our imprisonment in bodies of clay and water, and entanglement in the things of sense constitute a veil which hides the Vision of God from us, although it does not prevent our attaining to some knowledge of Him. For this reason God said to Moses on Mount Sinai, "Thou shalt not see Me."

The truth of the matter is this, that, just as the seed of man becomes a man, and a buried datestone becomes a palm-tree, so the knowledge of God acquired on earth will in the next world change into the Vision of God, and he who has never learnt the knowledge will never have the Vision. This Vision will not be shared alike by all who know, but their discernment of it will vary exactly as their knowledge. God is one, but He will be seen in many different ways, just as one object is reflected in different ways by different mirrors, some showing it straight, and some distorted, some clearly and some dimly.

...

Ambition and pride are diseases which can only be cured in some such way. God said unto Jesus, "O Jesus! when I see in My servants' hearts pure love for Myself unmixed with any selfish desire concerning this world or the next, I act as guardian over that love." Again, when people asked Jesus "What is the highest work of all?" he answered, "To love God and to be resigned to His will."

...

He who supposes that it is possible to enjoy happiness in the next world apart from the love of God is far gone in error, for the very essence of the future life is to arrive at God as at an object of desire long aimed at and attained through countless obstacles. This enjoyment of God is happiness. But if he had no delight in God before, he will not delight in Him then, and if his joy in God was but slight before it will be but slight then. In brief, our future happiness will be in strict proportion to the degree in which we have loved God here.

...

The fourth test is that he will love the Koran, which is the Word of God, and Muhammad, who is the Prophet of God; if his love is really strong, he will love all men, for all are God's servants, nay, his love will embrace the whole creation, for he who loves any one loves the works he composes and his handwriting.

Jarvis the Duck

Kurt Venables

So many people run around every day worrying about every little thing. I always say, "Don't worry, man, be happy!"



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The Awakening

Magic Doorway into the Divine

Devrah Laval

I guess it was my time or, rather, God's time. I was 29 years old. I had a good husband and I was a successful model and dancer. By conventional standards, I had an enviable life and yet I felt somehow empty. Something was haunting me.

Then, during a routine check-up, my doctor told me that my uterus had completely dissolved and I would never menstruate again. I would never have any children. I was devastated by the news and was telling a friend about it when she told me about an upcoming workshop designed to take participants to enlightenment, provided they were willing to apply themselves. I felt a surging force of desire, stronger than anything I had ever known. My simple response was "I must go." We both forgot about my uterus.

Getting myself to the workshop was surprisingly difficult. When I told Jeff, my husband, he said, "You can't go." He had never tried to prevent me from doing anything before, but this time he was not only adamant, but angry. I felt that I was fighting for my life. I told him I was going anyway. The next day I asked my boss if I could take Saturday off, but he refused. Like my husband, he was adamant. I told him I was sorry but I must go. By the time I left for the weekend, I had no idea if I would have a job or a marriage when I returned on Monday. But I felt as if something greater was driving me and I had no control over it.

Sleeping bag in hand, I was dropped off at an old retreat lodge for monks outside the city. Everything was white and austere. No flowers. No colour. There was one tiny closet for everyone's clothes. Each small bedroom had eight hard bunk beds. It was an icy night in November and everything felt harsh, cold and naked. I just wanted to go home, but I also knew I had already crossed the line and there was no returning.

I was ushered downstairs to the workshop room with the other participants where we were welcomed with herbal tea and honey. All of our valuables were collected, packaged and stored away for safekeeping. We were not allowed to wear watches, jewellery, makeup or cologne. Nor were we allowed to drink coffee or eat anything other than the macrobiotic food provided. We were told that during the workshop we would be paired off and face our partners for one-hour intervals in which we would take turns asking each other one question, "Tell me who you are." We would have an uninterrupted period of time to answer and then we'd switch roles. After an hour, we'd change partners and continue. This would go on for 18 hours each day, apart from breaks for meals and to rest.

The first night we did a few exercises to prepare ourselves, to get to know one another and to learn the technique. At the end of the evening, we collapsed into our hard, cold bunks. Nobody slept. We were awakened at 5 AM. It was horribly cold, I got up, stumbled to the bathroom and made my way to the workshop room where I sat across from a half-asleep stranger who said, "Tell me who you are."

I was miserable. I am not a morning person and have a great aversion to talking to anyone without at least a cup of tea first, but then breakfast arrived. I had a chance to shower and returned to the routine. The sun slowly began to shine and I began to feel better. Even my partners became more interesting and alive as they too began to warm to the routine. Alternating every few minutes, we continued with “Tell me who you are.”

I enjoyed baring my soul in this very safe environment, however, the facilitator warned us: “Stay focused on experiencing and communicating the absolute truth of who you really are.” Hours went by, lunch came and went, more cleaning, more exercises. The room began to take on a palpable quality of otherworldliness. It was surreal. Day turned to night and I was exhausted. My head began to ache, but I had to keep going. “Who am I? Who am I?” over and over again. “Who am I?” became my mantra.

By bedtime, I was so sick and exhausted I thought I would die. I fell into the bunk and slept a bit. At 5 AM the morning bell rang, announcing the beginning of day two. I couldn’t believe that we could be so tortured. To the bathroom and then down to the workshop room to sit in front of another partner with bad breath saying to me, “Tell me who you are.”

I was getting angry and the pain in my head was getting worse. I thought of running away, but there was no transportation back to the city. Breakfast passed, showering, more partner work, lunch. The pain and frustration were getting worse for all of us. Many had vomit bags next to them. The pain in my head was unbearable; I felt as though it was about to explode. Finally, at about 4 PM, every cell in my body felt like it was being crushed. I couldn’t bear it anymore. My partner said, “Tell me who you are.”

I looked him straight in the eye and said with the most rage I had ever expressed in my life, “Who the hell do you think I am?” Then with great force, I screamed out, “I am me.” At that moment, I heard a huge cracking sound at the top of my head. Suddenly, I was free of all of my aches, pains and limitations. Perhaps this is how death feels.

I became a very large presence. The facilitator noticed and came rushing over, asking, “Who are you?” I replied, “I am me.” I couldn’t describe in words this all-pervasive experience of freedom and knowing, but the “me” I felt was not my body or personality. “I am God!” I said. Then I pointed to myself and said, “This is God. I am!”

The facilitator laughed heartily. I began to laugh uncontrollably and fell off my chair. I rolled around on the floor in fits of ecstasy, laughing at all of the lifelong beliefs that I was just this body and its desires, hopes and dreams. I wanted to share my joy with some of my other partners, but they just sat there looking at me as if I were insane. They remained in the same great misery that I had just come out of. I realized in that moment that I was having a deep inner experience, not anything visible except for the light that some could see emanating from my body that divine day.

For the rest of that day and night, I was bathed in light and felt love toward everyone and everything. All the things that I had hated the day before were now luminous and beautiful. I

spent three hours weeping as I looked at my hand and arm. I was awestruck at the miracle of the body that I lived in. I felt great reverence for the power that lay behind this magnificent creation, even though I now knew that I was that power. I was experiencing the divine union of my body and soul. Nothing has ever come close to the supreme joy of that state. Every person who sat before me was God. And by the end of the weekend, I knew that I would never be the same again.

When I arrived home, my husband was happy to see me and I still had a job on Monday, at least for a while. Each person I interacted with at work felt divine. Looking deeply into their eyes, I felt tremendous compassion for them as they shared their problems with me. I knew then that God knows everything about us and has infinite patience.

But the most unexpected and shocking change was that I began to menstruate after five years. My doctor was curious and concerned and ordered some tests. A few days later, he called and told me that my uterus was completely whole and perfectly healthy. I knew that a miracle had taken place.

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Vancouver-based Devrah Laval is author of *The Magic Doorway into the Divine*. She has been a spiritual counselor and has facilitated numerous groups and workshops. www.themagicdoorway.com



Journey to Veganism

Hrvoje Butkovic

I've recently mentioned to a friend that I've been looking into the Jain diet and thinking about adopting it. She responded that I might as well commit suicide and thereby completely eliminate all adverse effects that my existence has on the environment. Her reaction took me by surprise. It didn't even occur to me that this is how other people might see the change.

Non-violence and compassion feature prominently in Jainism, going so far as to influence their diet. Many Jains don't consume milk products because of the cruelty to which animals are commonly subjected on dairy farms. Some others don't eat root vegetables so as to avoid killing them. To me, these seemed like noble enough principles to live by, so much so that I began to seriously contemplate implementing them.

But firstly, a bit of background.

I grew up in rural Croatia, which was a part of Yugoslavia at that time. Like other village dwellers, we were largely self-sufficient when it came to food. We grew most of our vegetables, fruit and nuts. Meat was also home-grown, predominantly in the form of pigs and chickens. Pigs were slaughtered every autumn to supply us with meat for the year. Chickens met the same fate at irregular intervals. We even kept bees.

As can be expected, our diet was seasonal in nature and largely consisted of the food that we were able to glean off the land. It was supplemented with food that we couldn't grow for climatic reasons, as well as certain processed foods that we couldn't easily make ourselves. Apart from the inclusion of some tropical fruit, that diet didn't change appreciably when we moved to a city in South Africa. We simply resorted to buying what we were in the habit of growing ourselves. It was a minor change to a comfortable routine.

That routine experienced the first signs of strain about two years ago. One of the subjects that I was reading about had to do with the effect that our civilisation was having on the environment. I remember learning how toxic substances that could be found in trace quantities in plants were being retained by the animals that consumed them, leading to steadily increasing concentrations higher up the food chain. It was also educational to discover that eating grain was several times more efficient than feeding it to livestock and then eating meat. It didn't occur to me to consider these kinds of repercussions before.

As I learned more about the subject, my perception of meat gradually changed. From being a necessary, often a dominant ingredient in a meal, it became an optional extra, something that would feature in only one meal out of several. This was not a concerted effort on my part to eliminate meat from my diet, but simply a reflection of the greatly diminished value that I saw in eating it. The shift created a new comfort zone about a year ago.

It would have probably remained there had I not learned about the cruel treatment that animals were routinely subjected to on factory farms, for no reason other than to reduce food production costs. It brought back memories of pig slaughter from my childhood. I remember wondering what it was like for pigs to listen as one of them was being held down and had its throat slit, accompanied by inevitable screams of terror and pain drowned by the gurgling of blood. It was a distressing thought, but one that didn't hold my attention for very long as a child. This was our way of life. It didn't occur to me then that it could be different.

It did now. The cruelty widespread in factory farming wasn't restricted to the slaughter. It encompassed the whole of the animals' lives, and so included dairy and egg production as well. It didn't take me long to decide that I wanted no part in it. I asked myself what was preventing me from abandoning meat altogether. Since meals containing meat were already several days apart, it seemed like a simple matter to extend the gap indefinitely. The ploy worked. I became a vegetarian about six months ago.

The successful transition was a major revelation for me. It literally woke me up to the fact that I was shying away from taking responsibility for the food that I ate. Thanks to this realisation, I soon proceeded to exclude other animal products, particularly dairy and eggs. I knew by this stage that I had the power to make the change. It was just a matter of working out the details of substitute meals and giving my body time to acclimatise to the changes in nutrition. Two months after becoming a vegetarian, the switch to a vegan diet was complete.

Veganism has a reputation of self-denial, as if one is giving up the pleasures of life when walking down this path. This sentiment is understandable from the perspective of the modern western diet. An average person can eat everything that a vegan can eat, as well as all animal products, particularly meat, dairy and eggs. The trick is not to define veganism in terms of what one can no longer eat – a great deal, especially when it comes to desserts – but instead look at it through the eyes of the variety of food that remains available for consumption.

When I decided to drop animal products from the food that I prepared, the side dishes that were left were so meagre that I had no choice but to look for something to supplement them with. This was the first time that I took a close look at all the

vegetables that I could find in the shops. They'd always been there; I just never paid attention to them before. Some I had never eaten before. Most did not belong on my daily menu.

Going through my old recipes and replacing meat, eggs and cheese with vegetables was an eye-opening experience. Each animal product was replaced with at least five and often more vegetable ingredients. By cutting out animal products, I unwittingly ended up with a diet that was far richer and more diverse than what came before.

Because of frequent warnings over the intake of nutrients like protein and calcium, I decided to analyse the nutritional content of the foods that I was now eating. This proved to be another revelation. The protein requirement turned out not to be so high, and fairly easily met by combining several protein-rich sources, particularly pulses and grains. It was even more difficult to find vegetables that didn't contain calcium. Some eclipsed milk in their calcium content, with almonds containing twice as much. The few nutrients that were hard to come by naturally, particularly vitamin B12, could be acquired from fortified cereals and soy milk. In fact, it seemed to be far more difficult to suffer adverse effects from a varied vegan diet than from a diet rich in animal products.

Other surprises unfolded along the way. Because all fruit and nuts as well as many vegetables could be eaten raw, cooking lost its importance. The cost of food likewise went down, as did my weight. Considering that my favourite food was pizza, favourite dessert ice cream, and favourite drink a blend of milk and fruit juice, dispensing with these no doubt had its part to play.

At some point I started wondering how important a fridge would be if the whole family adopted a vegan diet. It would still be a useful kitchen appliance for keeping water cold and prolonging the life of fruit and vegetables, especially tofu. However, it would no longer be indispensable.

Examining the ingredients in processed food was a rude awakening. Most of it contained animal products. This was obviously true for chocolates, cakes, puddings and ice cream, but even sweets, biscuits and chips often contained some dairy or gelatine. Instead of looking for non-animal substitutes, I decided to simply exclude these food categories from my diet. Doing so took a great deal of perseverance. Once I made the transition, however, I was amazed at how much simpler my life had become. I could disregard all of these distractions to focus on things that really mattered to me. It helped eliminate a great deal of clutter.

It is the deliberate nature of these changes that I have found the most rewarding. For the first time in my life, I feel as if I'm in control of what I eat as opposed to it being in control of me. In the past, the decision of what to eat, and even how much to eat, was usually made by my taste buds. Tasty foods were impossible to resist. Distasteful foods

just could not be stomached. Now this has expanded to give voice to other considerations. Tastiness is still a necessary requirement, but no longer a sufficient one.

Looking back, the change seems far easier than it appeared from the other side. Cravings for food that I used to eat and no longer do are pretty much gone. Knowing what it takes to make the transition, I have less reason to worry about the difficulties of pursuing it. The question that arises now is where to from here?

As much as I admire Jains for their compassionate ways, I can't say that I'm about to follow in their footsteps. Becoming a vegan has made a significant adjustment to my lifestyle. In many ways, the change has been hard on my family and friends as well. Even though I've retained my cooking duties, I can no longer expand my repertoire as I cannot taste much of the food that my family eats. Eating out is equally tricky. Many restaurants and fast food outlets don't offer a single vegan meal on their menu. The social life inevitably suffers as a result.

Even though the Jain diet remains an unrealised ideal for me, I cannot help but feel that the very act of pursuing it as far as we can would transform the world for the better for everyone involved.

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