

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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