

*Can eating animal flesh  
ever be ethical?*



## Contents

Living the life prescribed by Theosophy entails much more than simply abstaining from meat and wine; it requires wholly unselfish thoughts and deeds, untiring devotion to the welfare of humanity, and unutterable aspiration to the Divine Self within.	3
Is the epicure who tickles his palate with dishes of meats not necessary for sustenance is in the same league as the woman who wears bird's feathers?	6
If it is true that to ascertain the truth of the doctrines put forward by Theosophy many lives will be required after one has started on the Path, how and where am I to find that Path and to know it when I do?	7
<b>The kingdom of heaven is not gained only by abstaining from meat on Fridays, or any other day.</b>	
Is a purely vegetable diet indispensable to a high and serene spiritual life?	8
What is the opinion of the leaders of the Theosophical Society in regard to vegetarianism?	8



We read that Roman and other epicures “loved” the cooked tongues and brains of nightingales and other delicate birds. The present constitution of the majority of the human race is such that it gladly sanctions the use of the word love in this connection, and entirely fails to see the horror of the wholesale murder involved. In the strict and abstract sense of the word, however, even this use is perfectly correct; it is only the “consequences” involved that throw this gloom over the word in this reference. As Bhīshma said:

“Flesh groweth not on grasses, nor on trees, nor on stones; it is obtained only by killing a living creature; hence the sin of eating it.”

— Bhagavan Das<sup>1</sup>

**Living the life prescribed by Theosophy entails much more than simply abstaining from meat and wine; it requires wholly unselfish thoughts and deeds, untiring devotion to the welfare of humanity, and unutterable aspiration to the Divine Self within.**

The question “whether to eat meat or not to eat it” is one which is uppermost in the minds of many theosophists today. Some will eat no meat, while others still use it, and a few who are vegetarians seem to think that the meat-eaters are sinners and cannot be spiritual. Although I belong to the Spanish-speaking people, I am a vegetarian and a theosophist; and I hope that the difference in race will not have any effect on my American readers, brother theosophists.

Let us examine the different standpoints taken, and look at the matter without any bias in favour of either vegetarianism or carnivorous diet.

The meat-eaters say that in nature we find cows and elephants eating no meat, and yet that they seem to have no additional spirituality as a result, and that among men we often see those who, although they eat meat, are at the same time highly spiritualized. This is their case. The vegetarians have these arguments:

- 1 That animal food necessarily imparts to the eater the qualities of the animal, and that the eating of meat not only may give us the diseases of the animal, but also tends to inflame the blood and makes the gross envelope of the body more dense than ever;
- 2 That it is wrong to kill animals for food, because, as we did not give them life, we have no right to take it away from them;
- 3 That by living on vegetable food we make the gross body more permeable to higher influences.

There may be finer divisions of the argument, but the above will give their case in general.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Bhagavan Das. *The Science of the Emotions*. Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1924 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), p. 167. (A searchable PDF of the 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. of 1908 can be found in our Constitution of Man Series.)

<sup>2</sup> [Cf. “Don’t teach that vegetarianism is the road to heaven and spiritual growth. Was not the great Nazarene right when he intimated that, the kingdom of heaven being within, it did not come from eating or drinking? And has not our old friend H.P. Blavatsky written suggestively that cows and elephants are pure vegetarians? Reflect on the fact that some of the very best people on earth were meat-eaters, and that wicked or gross thoughts are more hurtful than the eating of a ton of flesh.” Dara Eklund (Comp.). *Echoes of the Orient: The Writings of William Quan Judge*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Pasadena: Theosophical University Press: Vol. I, 2009; THEOSOPHICAL DON’TS, p. 468]

It must make much difference in the conclusion whether one is speaking of a man belonging to the western nations or of one who, like the Hindu, comes of a race which for ages has taken no animal food. It is held by many physiologists that the stomach is an organ for the digestion of animal food only, and that in a vegetarian the pyloric valve leading from the stomach is so paralyzed from want of use that the food passes directly into the intestines. It must therefore follow that the western man may be placing himself in danger of fatal derangement of his system when he leaves meat-eating and takes up vegetarianism. This has, indeed, been proved in many cases to be a real danger. I have before me the reports of several theosophists who found that it was not possible for them to make the change; at the same time others have made it with perfect safety. The trouble did not arise from weakness following lack of meat, but from imperfect digestion causing disease. This is due to the retention in the stomach of vegetable matter for so long a time that yeast and other growths were thrown into the circulation; these are sufficient to bring on tuberculosis, nervous diseases, and other manifold derangements. It is well known that a man who has melancholia due to systememia<sup>1</sup> cannot expect to reach a high development in occultism.

We next find that there are powerful black magicians in farther India and in many other places who do not deny themselves meat but take as much as they wish, and also stimulants. From this we conclude that power over nature's forces is not solely in the hands of the vegetarians. We need not stop to consider the fate of such magicians, as that has been often dilated upon.

Now although the Hindu has been always a vegetarian, it is a fact that for him the acquirement of knowledge of absolute truth is as difficult as it is for the western man who eats meat. In the books of the Hindu on the subject of spiritual culture or soul development, the rules laid down are extremely hard to follow. The eating of meat is not definitely referred to, but the attainment of union with the Supreme, *from which alone knowledge of absolute truth results*, is hedged about with difficulties in comparison with which the eating of meat sinks into the shade; but we must remember that it is assumed in India that the student is not a meat-eater. The reason for the prohibition, however, is that a man has no right to kill animals for his food or for any other reason. He must refrain, not because the act is forbidden, but because his whole nature, through the great love and pity that he feels, naturally recoils from such an act. It is plain, if this rule be the correct one — and I think it is — that a person who stops the eating of meat in order that he may by complying with that condition attain to a development he has set before him, misses the mark, and has acquired a selfish motive for the line thus adopted. It is an old and true saying that the kingdom of God cometh not from taking or refraining from meat, nor from the refraining from anything whatever, but that it is *within us*. In another place it is said that this kingdom of heaven is taken by violence; that is, it requires all knowledge and all goodness to attain at last to that union with the spirit which is the kingdom of heaven. And such attainments are not in the reach of either those who, on the one hand, long for sentimental religion only, or those who, on the other, work that they may reach the blissful result for themselves. The first, although extremely good, are barred from

---

<sup>1</sup> [systemic anaemia]

want of knowledge, and the other by the selfish motive at the bottom of their practice. In the “Great Journey,” translated from the Sanskrit by Mr. Arnold,<sup>1</sup> is a beautiful illustration of the spirit and motive which must actuate us. Yudhishtira reached heaven after losing his friends on the way, and was at the gate accompanied by his dog who looked to him as his only friend; and when he was refused admission because the dog was with him, he declined to enter. He was let in, and the dog revealed himself as one of the gods; then the king found that his friends were not there, and was told that they were in hell. He asked to go there, and was sent. He found it an awful place and was on the point of returning, when the pitiful voices of his friends called him back, saying that he gave them some comfort by his presence, and he then said he would stay in hell for them. This was reported to the gods, and they in a body went to hell and rescued all the denizens of the place for his sake. The selfishness or selflessness of the motive<sup>2</sup> will determine the result.

We find, on referring to the great Indian work of Patañjali on the Philosophy of Yoga, that nothing is said about meat-eating. The disciple is not met with the regulation at the outset, “You must refrain from eating meat.” This is not because the people were all vegetarians at the time it was written, because even then permissions were extended to certain classes of men for the eating of flesh. The warrior was allowed to eat meat, and out of the warrior caste arose many who attained to the supreme heights of adeptship. To say that carnivorous diet will *in itself* exclude you from spiritual attainments is of like character with the statement that one cannot attain unless he is of the unsullied Brahman caste. That was sometimes said by some Brahmans, but is easily met by the fact that the great Krishna was a shepherd by caste.

What, then, is the true theosophic diet? It is that which best agrees with you, taken in moderation, neither too much nor too little. If your constitution and temperament will permit vegetarianism, then that will give less heat to the blood; and, if it is practiced from the sincere conviction that it is not true brotherhood to destroy living creatures so highly organized as animals, then so much the better. But if you refrain from meat in order to develop your psychic powers and senses, and continue the same sort of thoughts you have always had, neither cultivating nor practicing the highest altruism, the vegetarianism is in vain.

The inner nature has a diet out of our thoughts and motives. If those are low or gross or selfish, it is equivalent to feeding that nature upon gross food. True theosophic diet is therefore not of either meat or wine; it is unselfish thoughts and deeds, untiring devotion to the welfare of “the great orphan Humanity,” absolute abnegation of self, unutterable aspiration to the Divine — the Supreme Soul. This only is what we can grow upon. And vain are the hopes of those who pin their faith on any or other doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [Section of his *Indian Idylls* (Boston 1884), being translations from the *Mahābhārata*.]

<sup>2</sup> [as well as the action]

<sup>3</sup> First published in *The Path*, Vol. III, December 1888, pp. 290-92. Republished in Dara Eklund (*Comp.*). *Echoes of the Orient: The Writings of William Quan Judge*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Pasadena: Theosophical University Press: Vol. I, 2009; THEOSOPHIC DIET, pp. 99-102.

*Is the epicure who tickles his palate with dishes of meats not necessary for sustenance is in the same league as the woman who wears bird's feathers?*

A correspondent asks: "Will you kindly explain why, if you think it wrong to kill a water bug, that you should consider it right to slay larger animals for food?"

I do not remember having said it was *wrong* to kill a water bug; hence there is no conclusion to be made from that to the question of feeding on animals, so far as I am concerned.

The questions of right and wrong are somewhat mixed on this subject. If one says it is morally wrong to kill a water bug, then it follows that it is wrong to live at all, inasmuch as in the air we breathe and the water imbibed there are many millions of animals in structure more complicated than bugs. Though these are called *infusoria* and *animalculae*, yet they are living, moving beings as much as are bugs. We draw them in and at once they are destroyed, slain to the last one. Shall we therefore stop living? The whole of life is a battle, a destruction and a compromise as long as we are on this material plane. As human beings we have to keep on living, while in our destructive path millions of beings are hourly put to death. Even by living and earning a living each one of us is preventing someone else from doing the same, who, if we were dead, might step into our shoes. But if we abandoned the fight — were we, indeed, able to so do — then the ends of evolution could not be attained. Hence we have to stay and endure what Karma falls from the necessary death we occasion.

So the true position seems to me to be this, that in certain environments, at certain stages of evolution, we have to do an amount of injury to others that we cannot avoid. So while we thus live we must eat, some of flesh and others of the vegetable. Neither class is wholly right or wrong. It becomes a wrong when we deliberately without actual need destroy the lives of animals or insects. So the man who was born in a family and generation of meat-eaters and eats the meat of slaughtered animals does less wrong than the woman who, though a vegetarian, wears the feathers of slaughtered birds in her hats, since it was not necessary to her life that such decoration should be indulged in. So the epicure who tickles his palate with many dishes of meats not necessary for sustentation is in the same case as the woman who wears bird's feathers. Again as to shoes, saddles, bridles, pocketbooks, and what not, of leather. These are all procured from the skins of slain animals. Shall they be abolished? Are the users of them in the wrong? Anyone can answer. Or did we live near the north pole we would be compelled to live on bears' and wolves' meat and fat. Man, like all material beings, lives at the expense of some others. Even our death is brought about by the defeat of one party of microbes who are devoured by the others, who then themselves turn round and devour each other. But the real man is a spirit-mind, not destructible nor destroying; and the kingdom of heaven is not of meat nor of drink: it cometh not from eating nor refraining — it cometh of itself.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> First published in *The Path*, Vol. VI, March 1892, p. 397. Republished in Dara Eklund (*Comp.*). *Echoes of the Orient: The Writings of William Quan Judge*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Pasadena: Theosophical University Press: Vol. I, 2009; ABOUT KILLING ANIMALS, pp. 247-48.



DOWN TO EARTH SERIES  
IS SLAUGHTERING ANIMALS COMPATIBLE WITH HIGHER ETHICS?

*If it is true that to ascertain the truth of the doctrines put forward by Theosophy many lives will be required after one has started on the Path, how and where am I to find that Path and to know it when I do?*

Do not look at this matter as if you had never been on the path before. It is more than likely in every case where an inquirer asks this question, either mentally or of some other person, that he has trod the path in another life. Some hold that all Theosophists were on this path hitherto. Each life is a step on the path, and even though we may make many and huge mistakes, we can still be on the way. One should not be anxious to know if he is on the path by reason of a constant conformity to some set rules or regulations about a path. That anxiety is mechanical. Nature and the path of true wisdom are not mechanical, but for each soul there is a way and means suitable to it and to none other. By watching these mechanical ways mistakes are made. For instance, one becomes a vegetarian from a secret desire to get nearer the astral world thereby, and not because it is deemed a sin to take life. The rule will not be violated. Great inconvenience is undergone and much watching indulged in so as to keep the rule, and much attention and energy is given to it which is taken from some other duty. All this is a mistake, for the kingdom of heaven is not gained by eating meat or by refraining from it. This mistake is due to too much desire to be sure one is on the path.

But it is not necessary one should know that he is on the path. If he uses his best reason, best intuition, and best effort to find out his duty and do it, then one may be sure the path is there without stopping to look for it. And the path for one person may be the carting of packages, while for another it may lie in deep study or contemplation. On this the *Bhagavad-Gītā*<sup>1</sup> says that the duty of another is full of danger, and it is better to die in the performance of one's own duty than to perform most wonderfully the duty of another.<sup>2</sup>



---

<sup>1</sup> [ch. 3 vs. 35]

<sup>2</sup> First published in *The Theosophical Forum*, New Series, May 1895 through February 1896. Republished in Dara Eklund (Comp.). *Echoes of the Orient: The Writings of William Quan Judge*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Pasadena: Theosophical University Press: Vol. II, 2009; QUESTION 4, pp. 370-71.

## The kingdom of heaven is not gained only by abstaining from meat on Fridays, or any other day.

*Is a purely vegetable diet indispensable to a high and serene spiritual life?*

One might eat grass, grain and turnips, a million years, but that *of itself* would not produce a high or serene spiritual life. All these things are aids, not necessities.

If the physical condition is such that animal food can be dispensed with, or without disturbing other people or neglecting the labour given, then it is wise to do away with it. The physical is thereby purified, making it less gross, material, and animal like. But “one man’s meat is another’s poison.” Use that which seems the wisest to you. “It is not that which goeth into the mouth but that which cometh out that defileth a man.”<sup>1</sup> The right thought, the proper motive, the true Will have more to do with true Occultism than any exterior acts or practices.<sup>2</sup>

*What is the opinion of the leaders of the Theosophical Society in regard to vegetarianism?*

Physicians and those who have tried vegetarianism are those who should speak on this. The opinions of “leaders,” as such, are of no consequence. I tried it for nine years, and found it injurious. This is because the western man has no heredity of vegetarianism behind him, and also because his dishes as a vegetarian are poor. They should be confined to rice, barley, wheat, oats, some nuts and a little fruit; but westerners don’t like such a meagre variety. The stomach does not digest vegetables, it is for meat; the teeth are for tearing and grinding meat. Most of those vegetarians I know eat a whole lot of things injurious to them and are not benefited. Had we an ancestry going back thousands of years, vegetarians always, the case might be different. I know that most of the experienced physicians we have in the Society — and I know a great many — agree with my view, and some of them insist that vegetarianism is wrong under any conditions. With the latter view I do not agree. There ought to come a time in our evolution when new methods of food production will be known, and when the necessity for killing any highly organized creature will have disappeared.

The other branch of the subject is that regarding spiritual development and vegetarianism. It has been so often dealt with it is sufficient to say that such development has nothing to do with either meat-eating or the diet of vegetables. He who gives up meat-eating but does not alter his nature and thoughts, thinking to gain in spiritual-

---

<sup>1</sup> [Matthew xv, 11]

<sup>2</sup> First published in Questions from *The Path*. Republished in Dara Eklund (Comp.). *Echoes of the Orient: The Writings of William Quan Judge*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Pasadena: Theosophical University Press: Vol. II, 2009; 2<sup>nd</sup> QUESTION FROM C., pp. 389-90.

[Although the newly started serial, *The Theosophical Forum*, was first circulated in April 1889, curiously there is no mention of it in *The Path* issue for that month. *The Path* continued to print its own dialogues under various titles such as “Answers to Questioners,” or “The Stream of Thought and Queries.” We continue with them here. — Dara Eklund.]



DOWN TO EARTH SERIES  
IS SLAUGHTERING ANIMALS COMPATIBLE WITH HIGHER ETHICS?

ity, may flatter himself and perhaps make a fetish of his denial, but will certainly thereby make no spiritual progress.<sup>1</sup>



“Flesh-eating among Buddhist monks,”  
“Plutarch on why eating animals is repulsive”  
“Taylor’s Vindication of the Rights of Brutes,”  
— in the same series.

---

<sup>1</sup> First published in *The Theosophical Forum*, New Series, May 1895 through February 1896. Republished in Dara Eklund (Comp.). *Echoes of the Orient: The Writings of William Quan Judge*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Pasadena: Theosophical University Press: Vol. II, 2009; QUESTION 61, pp. 384-85.