

Compassion and Sensitivity towards all Living Beings is the essence of Spirituality

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In primitive times before the advent of agriculture, humans were basically nomads. To keep oneself alive the intake of food is very essential. Hunting was the means adopted by early man. Whatever was available around one's environment, like fruits, vegetables and the easy-to-prey animals were the only source of sustenance. With the discovery of fire, man, by trial and error, found that fruit, vegetables and the flesh of hunted animals, if cooked over the fire, became delicious, digestive and consumable. Gradually with the advancement of agricultural science and technology, various types of food are now cultivated naturally, as well as organically which are vegetarian or non-vegetarian in nature depending upon the ingredients.

With the evolution of man and greater understanding by spiritual masters, religions like Buddhism and Jainism advocated strict vegetarian diets. Slowly and steadily this trend influenced life styles of other faiths that had never barred their followers from eating meat. According to the latest figures it is estimated that nearly 30 per cent of India's population have turned vegetarian. Across the world there are upto 9 per cent of the population in various countries who are vegetarians, and their numbers are increasing day by day. There are many factors which motivate a person to become a vegetarian – religious, nutritional, ethical, environmental, physiological, psychological, food safety, social or spiritual.

An interesting aspect of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the *Shabad Guru* of the Sikhs, is that it always throws light on the different paths available – invariably the choice is ours. Let us ponder over what Sri Guru Granth Sahib says on this topic : ਇਕਿ ਮਾਸਹਾਰੀ ਇਕਿ ਤ੍ਰਿਣੁ ਖਾਹਿ ॥

ਇਕਨਾ ਛਤੀਹ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤੁ ਪਾਹਿ ॥ ਇਕਿ ਮਿਟੀਆ ਮਹਿ ਮਿਟੀਆ ਖਾਹਿ ॥ [SGGS: 144] i.e. "Some eat meat while others eat grass. Some have all the thirty-six varieties of delicacies while others live in the dirt and eat mud."

Vegetarianism is the practice of not eating meat, including beef, poultry, fish and their by-products, with or without the use of dairy products or eggs. The difference between a vegetarian and non-vegetarian is that a vegetarian never eats meat but a non-vegetarian also eats vegetables besides meat. Guru Nanak has stated that there are persons who abound in luxury whereby they are lucky enough to have in their diets all the varieties of gourmet fare possible. In contrast are those poverty-stricken persons who live in squalor and misery and never get even one square meal a day.

Guru Angad speaks, "ਜੀਆ ਕਾ ਆਹਾਰੁ ਜੀਅ ਖਾਣਾ ਏਹੁ ਕਰੇਇ ॥ ਵਿਚਿ ਉਪਾਏ ਸਾਇਰਾ ਤਿਨਾ ਭਿ ਸਾਰ ਕਰੇਇ ॥ [SGGS: 955] "Animals eat other animals; this is what the Lord has given them as food. He created them in the oceans, and he provides for them as well."

It is a fact that in the woods, or in the water kingdom, the bigger animals prey upon the smaller and weaker animals for food. But the fact is that man has, over the centuries, emerged from the nomadic life into a civilized one, whereby many more arenas of food production have opened up to provide nutrition for us.

Ethically, I feel, "When all other means are exhausted, it is righteous to take the life of an animal, or fish or bird, to stay alive. But not when other sources of food are available." Such eventuality will never occur in our lifetime, observing the progress agriculture has made in the last decade by leaps and bounds. During the time of the latter Sikh Gurus, a period of

struggle in staying alive, Sikhs who were mostly on the run had to stay in jungles and hence, whatever was available had to be cooked and eaten. But now we do have a choice.

Guru Arjun says, “ਜਿਸ ਦਾ ਦਿਤਾ ਸਭੁ ਕਿਛੁ ਲੈਣਾ ॥ ਛਤੀਹ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਭੋਜਨੁ ਖਾਣਾ ॥ ਸੇਜ ਸੁਖਾਲੀ ਸੀਤਲੁ ਪਵਣਾ ਸਹਜ ਕੇਲ ਰੰਗ ਕਰਣਾ ਜੀਉ ॥੩॥ ਸਾ ਬੁਧਿ ਦੀਜੈ ਜਿਤੁ ਵਿਸਰਹਿ ਨਾਹੀ ॥ [SGGS: 100] “Everything we receive is a gift from Him. The 36 delicious foods to eat, cozy beds, cooling breezes, peaceful joy and the experience of pleasure. Give me that state of mind by which I may not forget You.”

According to Guru Arjun, while enjoying the gifts of the Lord, the state of one’s mind should be such that the Lord is never forgotten. What invariably happens is that we get emotionally attached to the gifts and, in the process of enjoying those gifts, forget the Giver.

Guru Nanak says, “ਛਤੀਹ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਭਾਉ ਏਕੁ ਜਾ ਕਉ ਨਦਰਿ ਕਰੇਇ ॥੧॥ ਬਾਬਾ ਹੋਰੁ ਖਾਣਾ ਖੁਸੀ ਖੁਆਰੁ ॥ ਜਿਤੁ ਖਾਯੈ ਤਨੁ ਪੀੜੀਐ ਮਨ ਮਹਿ ਚਲਹਿ ਵਿਕਾਰ ॥... [SGGS: 16] “The 36 flavours of ambrosial nectar are in the love of the One Lord; they are tasted only by one who is blessed by His Glance of Grace. O Baba, the pleasures of other foods are false. Eating them, the body is ruined, and wickedness and corruption enter into the mind.” Here Guru Nanak is speaking about the internal and the external – food for the soul and food for the body. Man’s intrinsic nature is to love, and a person who has the benevolent grace of God can taste inwardly the 36 flavors loving the one and only God. Love is compared here to food. What love is to the soul, so is food to the body.

Hence, man should normally eat those foods which do not harm the body. The consumption of excessive red meat, ghee, oil, etc. creates blockages of arteries resulting in strokes and heart attacks and subsequently necessitate by-pass/open heart surgeries which restrict one’s mobility and normal lifestyle. Likewise, excess intake of sugars cause tooth decay and diabetes which create further health complications or disorders. It is not a hard and fast rule that a food product, say tomatoes, which suits one will suit another. Tomatoes can be a cause of allergy to someone. Being aware of this allergy inevitably causes one to refrain from consuming tomatoes. Let us recall over what two American M.D.’s have to say about meat :

“All red meats contain saturated fat. There is no such thing as truly lean meat. People who have red meat (trimmed or untrimmed) as a regular feature of their diets suffer in far greater numbers from heart attacks and strokes.” – Michael Klaper, M.D., Medical Director, Earth Save Foundation, Santa Cruz, California.

“The beef industry has contributed to more American deaths than all the wars of this century, all natural disasters, and all automobile accidents combined. If beef is your idea of real food for real people, you’d better live real close to a real good hospital.” – Neal D. Barnard, M.D., President, Physicians Committee For Responsible Medicine, Washington D.C.

The poultry, goat, lamb, fish or cow are animals which have most, if not all, of the organs which exist inside a human body. The only difference is that we have a mind which has given us the power to think and contemplate while animals have set patterns of behavior. Due to the mind, man has thus assumed a superior status vis-à-vis animals. **Does this superiority grant us the liberty to kill and slaughter the animals for the sake of our appetites?** It is a known fact that the pain, fear and suffering which humans undergo on being killed is no less for an animal, whether you *halal* it or do *jhatka* !

A statement uttered recently by a friend troubled me for days. “Suppose - tomorrow a group of beings from another planet were to land on Earth, beings who considered themselves

superior to us just as we feel superior to animals. Would they have the right to treat us as we treat the animals we breed, keep and kill for food?" This made me contemplate on what I had been doing so far for the sake of appeasing my appetite.

Guru Har Rai, the seventh Nanak, was an ardent lover of animals though ironically his predecessor Guru Har Gobind Sahib was a keen hunter. Hunting, as a sport, has come under most governments' scanner. In India there is a list of endangered species which, if hunted, is taken as a serious crime. No wonder some popular Bollywood stars are entangled in the buck hunting spree they once indulged in. The point I am trying to convey is that living patterns and concepts do not remain static. They are ever changing. Guru Har Rai created perhaps the first hospital for animals and birds at Kiratpur, Punjab. From his love and compassion for animals one cannot even imagine Guru Har Rai gorging away on flesh slaughtered for the mere pleasure of his appetite, leave aside hunting! As George Bernard Shaw has said, "Animals are my friends...and I don't eat my friends."

As long as we do not develop compassion and piety towards all living beings, whether on land, sky or seas, we shall be making lofty but false claims on our progress in spirituality. As man evolves on the path of spirituality, it is quite natural to feel disgust for slaughter-houses. So long as man does not refrain from killing anyone who has pulsating eyes, moves, swims and flies for the momentary pleasure of bodily appetite, man's conscience will not prick him at killing a fellow human being, for whatsoever cause it may be. Amazing, that in the 6th century B.C., Pythagoras had said, "For as long as men massacre animals, they will kill each other. Indeed, he who sows the seed of murder and pain cannot reap joy and love." How true in today's religious strife and terror-stricken world.

Those who crave for meat always quote the following hymn of Guru Nanak to justify their actions : "ਮਾਸੁ ਮਾਸੁ ਕਰਿ ਮੂਰਖੁ ਝਗੜੇ ਗਿਆਨੁ ਧਿਆਨੁ ਨਹੀ ਜਾਣੈ ॥ ਕਉਣੁ ਮਾਸੁ ਕਉਣੁ ਸਾਗੁ ਕਹਾਵੈ ਕਿਸੁ ਮਹਿ ਪਾਪ ਸਮਾਣੈ ॥"...[SGGS: 1289] – "The fools argue about flesh and meat, but they know nothing about meditation and spiritual wisdom. What is called meat and what is called green vegetables? What leads to sin?" Eating meat is not a sin. Neither is eating green vegetables a sin. We are not to argue on this. Indeed true! But interestingly, at the end of the *shabad*, Guru Nanak says to the Pandit with whom he is having a dialogue: "ਏਤੇ ਰਸ ਛੋਡਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਸੰਨਿਆਸੀ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਕਹੈ ਵਿਚਾਰਾ ॥

".. [SGGS: 1290] – "Forsaking these delicacies, one becomes a true sanyaasi, a detached hermit, Nanak reflects and speaks." **So the crux is to go beyond our desires and to live a simple life.**

A few days back, after reading George Bernard Shaw's lines, I felt the urge and desire for meat ebbing within me. Desires can be treated in two ways. Either repress them or fulfill them. Solution lies in going beyond them, which happens only when one has fulfilled the desires to the maximum whereby understanding dawns in the futility of pursuing those desires which have no end to themselves. Mark Guru Angad's words, "ਐਤਰਿ ਤ੍ਰਿਸਨਾ ਮਹਿ ਗਈ ਹਰਿ ਗੁਣ ਗਾਵੀਤਾ ॥" ...[SGGS: 955] – "The hunger within is conquered and overcome, singing the glorious praises of the Lord."

I call upon my Sikh brothers and sisters, nay, upon all readers who are "*kudrat key sab bandey*," ultimately the choice is ours, to be vegetarian or non-vegetarian. It is a personal decision. The only request is : **exercise this choice out of total awareness, in full consciousness and utter sincerity.** 'Sarbat da bhala' in *Ardas* means welfare of all. Does not *sarbat* include in its gamut all creatures living on earth, in the sea and sky

encompassing humans, animals, fishes and birds?

