

In the great epic The Mahabharata, "Ahimsa Paramo Dharma" is mentioned several times. Simply translated, 'Ahimsa Paramo Dharma' means non-violence is the highest duty or way of life. Bhishma, [grand-uncle the Pandavas and the Kauravas cousins] states that 'abstention from eating meat is a great sacrifice and provides many benefits. He explains "Ahimsa Paramo Dharma" as the highest religion; the highest self-control; the highest gift; the highest sacrifice; the highest friend; the highest happiness; the highest truth. Ahimsa is greater than gifts made in all sacrifices, ablutions performed in all sacred waters. The person that abstains from cruelty is the father and mother of all creatures'. Here ahimsa is translated as abstention from cruelty in relation to killing for the sake of eating the flesh of the killed animal for personal pleasure. In essence, Bhishma is stating that it is very beneficial to be vegetarian because thereby there is no cruelty to animals¹.

I translate Ahimsa as 'cause no harm to self, others, Mother Earth and Her inhabitants'. Let's take a look at how eating a plant based diet is beneficial to self, others, Mother Earth and her inhabitants.

Thanks to an abundance of scientific research that demonstrates the health and environmental benefits of a plant-based diet, even the federal government recommends that we consume most of our calories from grain products, vegetables and fruits². It is recommended that 50% of our plate should be fruits and vegetables, 25% should be whole grains and 25% should be protein. There are a variety of plant based protein that include tofu and pulses. This means that tofu and pulses are both a vegetable and protein. Pulses are made up of the dried, edible seeds of the legume family...so chickpeas, dry peas, beans, and lentils. Sustainable, versatile, cheap, and nutrition-filled these plant based proteins are considered "the world's most versatile super food", rich in multiple essential micronutrients (i.e., folate, zinc, potassium, magnesium, iron, and zinc, as wells as polyphenols. According to the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, research shows that polyphenols, and potent antioxidants (i.e., flavonoids, tannins, and phenolic acids) in these pulses have been linked to a significant decrease in low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL), the "lousy" cholesterol associated with the development of type II diabetes; and, high cholesterol and high blood pressure associated with heart disease³. Additionally, 75% of new infectious diseases in people were first found in animals. Not eating these animals might reduce the infectious diseases in human beings. In the Mahabharat, Bhishma stated that it is beneficial to be vegetarian; and today, research shows that a vegetarian diet reduces the risk for chronic degenerative diseases such as obesity, coronary artery disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and certain types of cancer including colon, breast, prostate, stomach, lung and esophageal cancer⁴.

¹ http://www.hindupedia.com/en/Ahimsa_Paramo_Dharma

² www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide

³ <http://www.activebeat.co/diet-nutrition/6-reasons-why-2016-is-the-international-year-of-pulses>

⁴ <https://www.vegetariantimes.com/health-and-nutrition/why-go-veg-learn-about-becoming-a-vegetarian>

According to data direct from the United Nations (UN), pulses are an extremely “sustainable superfood”. This means that they’re considered a “food of the future”, thanks to their low carbon footprint and decreased greenhouse gas emissions (self-fertilizing foods pull nitrogen from the air down into the soil), low water demand, and their ability to enrich the soil by leaving behind vital nutrients (i.e., healthy microbes and nitrogen). In contrast, meat has a high carbon hoofprint with increased greenhouse gas emissions. The vast volume of manure from mega farms contaminate the land and water leaving behind diseases that affect our health. Rajendra Pachauri, the chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Changes said, "Eat less meat, you'll be healthier and so will the planet"⁵.

As we cut down forest to create grazing pastures for our livestock we lose vital oxygen and homes for people and wildlife. Many of the world’s most threatened and endangered animals live in forests, and 1.6 billion people rely on benefits forests offer, including food, fresh water, clothing, traditional medicine and shelter. Forests play a critical role in mitigating climate change because they act as a carbon sink—soaking up carbon dioxide that would otherwise be free in the atmosphere and contribute to ongoing changes in climate patterns. Deforestation undermines this important carbon sink function. It is estimated that 15% of all greenhouse gas emissions are the result of deforestation.⁶ In the Amazon, around 17% of the forest has been lost in the last 50 years, mostly due to forest conversion for cattle ranching. It is estimated that 137 species of animals are becoming extinct each day, which adds up to 50,000 species disappearing every year, because of deforestation. As the chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Changes, Rajendra Pachauri said, "Eat less meat, you'll be healthier and so will the planet".

How are the cattle that become your steak or hamburger treated on the mega farms they are born into? Have we ever wondered about the life of the pig that becomes your pork chop or bacon on your plate? Do you know what happens to the male chicks in an egg laying farm? Or the life of the hens that laid your eggs for the 'easy-over' to go with the bacon for breakfast? Did you know that you ingest the violence suffered by these animals and the fear they experience as they are slaughtered to become protein on your plate? Will you still drink the milk if there were photos of calves being separated from their mothers on milk cartons? Will you still order that steak or hamburger if there was a picture on the packaging showing cattle standing in manure in crowded feedlots or being gutted? Will you buy that package of bacon if there was a picture of a pig being slaughtered or skinned alive? Eating meat is cruelty to animals and harmful to our physical and mental health. Can we stop the killing and eating the flesh of the killed animal for personal pleasure? Is gratifying your taste buds and your personal pleasure worth the pain and taking of another life?

Eating meat deprive starving children of food. It is estimated that about 9,000 children die every day of hunger or hunger related diseases. It takes much more grain, land and water to produce a

⁵ <http://www.economist.com/blogs/feastandfamine/2013/12/livestock>

⁶ <https://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/deforestation>

pound of meat than to produce a pound of grain. Livestock uses water inefficiently. It takes about 15,000 L of water to produce 1 kg of meat whereas it takes 1250 L of water to produce 1 Kg of grain or wheat. Animals use about 1/3 of the world's fresh water and about 1/3 of the world crops are fed to animals which are slaughtered to become beef or pork on your plates. If we use the grain and water fed to animals to feed our starving children will we be preventing the death of a child? I know it's more complicated but if there is less demand for meat then there will be less production of meat. The corporations in the meat industry may produce other products - maybe grain and pulses, canola oil and soy beans, fruits and vegetables to stay alive and in business. This is in your hands! Does it make sense that we use more land, grain and water to produce meat that is unhealthy for humans, animals and the planet? We can use less land and water to produce vegetables, fruits, grain and pulses for better physical and mental health and the health of the planet. You have the choice of what you put on your plates and in your bodies which will impact your health and the health of the Mother Earth and Her inhabitants.

'Ahimsa Paramo Dharma' means non-violence is the highest duty or way of life. By making the decision to eat less or no meat, we can protect our health and the health of Mother Earth and Her inhabitants including the most vulnerable children and animals. Pujya Swami Chidanandji Saraswati said, 'We can have a plan A and a plan B but there is no planet B. We have only one planet'. We are the trustees of Mother Earth and Her inhabitants. Are we ready, willing and able to accept the responsibility of our personal health and do our part for the health of our only home - Mother Earth?

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