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Eat, Drink and Be Healthy

Jennifer LaRue Huget, Columnist

Yogis welcome vegetarians and omnivores

By Jennifer LaRue Huget
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One of the persistent debates in the yoga community is whether yogis should be vegetarian. One side finds evidence in ancient texts that eschewing meat is among the central precepts of yogic tradition. Others find in yoga's teachings a more inclusive bent, a belief that yoga is for everyone, no matter what they choose to eat.

Data seem to support the latter stance. A 2008 "Yoga in America" survey conducted for Yoga Journal magazine found that almost 16 million people in this country practice yoga, while a Vegetarian Times survey that year found 7.3 million people in the United States are vegetarians.

I did my own little survey of people deeply entrenched in the yoga world. I wasn't surprised by the range of their responses or by their open-mindedness. They're yogis, after all.

"You'd think that yoga has just one message and that everyone interprets it the same way," says Debra Perlson-Mishalove, creative director and founder of Flow Yoga Center in the District. "But yoga welcomes everyone," vegans and omnivores alike.

The thing with yogis and vegetarian eating, Perlson-Mishalove says, is that "as you practice, you become more and more aware of your connection with yourself and the community around you." As that happens, she says, "you notice patterns emerging that aren't serving you." Meat eaters, for instance, "might start to pay more attention to what they put in their bellies and realize that all things are connected."

A vegetarian herself, Perlson-Mishalove urges those who want to move down this path without giving up meat altogether to "take baby steps. Maybe try Meatless Mondays. Or choose foods from kinder sources," such as farms that follow humane practices. "I encourage them to meet their meat."

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Should yogis be vegetarians? “Seems like such a simple question,” says Cathy Husid-Shamir, media relations director at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Lenox, Mass. “But as a rule, Kripalu’s stance on everything is ‘You be your own guide. Let your body be your guide.’ “ If eating a certain way, vegetarian or otherwise, makes your body feel good, then that’s probably the best way for you to eat.

Husid-Shamir says the center serves mostly vegetarian food, with a small selection of chicken and fish. The meat options are there for those who feel they need animal protein in their diets. “Some people reacted badly to all the beans and grains,” she says. “It was upsetting them.”

In the end, the principle of ahimsa carries the day at Kripalu. Ahimsa, variously translated as nonviolence or doing no harm to other creatures, is perhaps the most common argument in favor of yogis’ being vegetarian. Farming, butchering and eating animals seems the opposite of ahimsa to many practitioners. In Kripalu’s view, though, offering meat to some guests came to seem like a kind of ahimsa, too.

“You have to understand that there’s no unanimity of opinion in the yoga world” regarding vegetarianism, says Timothy McCall, medical editor for Yoga Journal. “There are dedicated yogis who eat meat, and there are dedicated yogis who shun it and think everyone else should shun it.”

“The crucial thing about yoga is that it cultivates your ability to feel what’s happening in your own body,” says McCall. “You develop a highly tuned mechanism, a reliable gauge of what’s serving you and not serving you in every aspect of your life, including your diet.”

A true yogi, McCall observes, is not guided by anyone else’s rules about what he should or shouldn’t eat. The more you practice, “your internal feedback becomes more and more reliable,” he says, allowing you to decide for yourself how eating certain foods make you feel.

McCall says the concept of ahimsa “causes you to consider the karmic implications of what you eat. It comes down not to just not eating meat, but asking how was that animal treated when it was living.”

In the end, though, McCall, a 10-year vegetarian who enjoys an occasional dairy product, says, “I take this stuff seriously but try to live a joyful life and not get too hung up on the details, including not worrying about what other people eat.”

“I call myself a 364 vegetarian,” McCall adds. “If I get invited for turkey and stuffing for Thanksgiving, I’ll take it,” he says.