Yoga and Veganism: An Historical Perspective by Dr. Benjamin Major

A current surge in the popularity of yoga seems to be going hand in hand with a similar rise in veganism and the two are often linked together as complementary lifestyles. Is this any more than a fad? Or can some concrete philosophical and historical links be made between these two ideas? This essay sets out to answer this question. We will begin by surveying pre-Patañjalian Indian spiritual traditions to see if one can find ideas here that point towards veganism. We will meet groups such as the Jains for whom all beings had a *jīva* or soul and who were (and continue to be) staunch followers of *ahiṃsā* or 'non-harming'. We will then focus in on the well-known core text of yoga, the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali and the accompanying commentary of Vyāsa. Specifically, the essay sets out to find some answers to the following important and interrelated questions:

1. Is there any evidence for the endorsement or practice of veganism within the school of yoga or related Indic spiritual traditions?
2. If not, then can the arguments put forward in these traditions nevertheless be extended to build a strong contemporary case for veganism amongst aspiring modern yogis?
3. Finally, in the modern context, does one have to be vegan in order to practice yoga?

Pre-Patañjalian Yoga and the Origins of *Ahiṃsā*

Of course, here in the West, there has always been an association between yoga and vegetarianism. India, regarded as the homeland of the yoga tradition, has the highest percentage of vegetarians of any country in the world (currently 38% of the population)[1] However, it certainly does not have the highest percentage of vegans, this honour goes to Israel, which as of 2018 appears to be the vegan capital of the world, with vegans comprising a (relatively) impressive 5% of the population[2]!

But has vegetarianism and *ahiṃsā* always been part of Indian culture? Let us travel back in time to the Bronze Age Harrapan or Indus Valley Civillisation (3300 – 1300 BCE). Located in what is now the area of Pakistan, north east Afghanistan and north-west India, this ancient and sophisticated civilisation may at one time have been the equal of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Sadly, we know very little about them. One of the most intriguing finds from these sites are the numerous small clay seals that measure approximately two inches by two inches. A few of these seals have been interpreted by some as representing yogis in a meditative posture, but I go along with Samuel (2008) in remaining cautiously sceptical about these claims. Other scholars, noting the frequency with which animals are depicted, have suggested that the origins of *ahiṃsā* might be discernible in these seals. For example, here is Chapple discussing one of the seals featuring the so-called proto-yogi:

> "This particular image, depicting a contemplative figure surrounded by a multitude of animals might suggest that perhaps all the animals depicted are sacred to this particular practitioner. Consequently these animals would be protected from harm. This might be the first indication of the practice of *ahiṃsā*." (Chapple, 1993: 6-7)

[1] According to data at www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-with-the-highest-rates-of-vegetarianism.html Last updated on 1 May 2017, Accessed on 2 May 2018.
[2] For example see https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/17/there-is-no-kosher-meat-the-israelis-full-of-zeal-for-going-vegan (Last updated 17 March 2018, Accessed on 2 May 2018) and there are many other sources which support this statistic.

Now, I have to say, I find this all a bit of a stretch! It may very well be that this ancient civilisation venerated animals and were closely attuned with nature, but this hardly makes them unique. Our ancestors were just generally more deeply connected with nature, and there was simply much less capacity for doing harm, as the modern 'apparatus of harm' such as factory farming was still far, far into the future. But this does necessarily make these Indus Valley peoples practitioners of *ahiṃsā* and it certainly does not make them vegetarians or vegans, and indeed findings of the bones of animals in the ruins of these cities (Schmidt, 1968) could be seen to point away from this thesis.

Moving further along in history we find the Aryans, semi-nomadic pastoralists who according to many historians had lived on the steppes of what is now southern Russia since about 4500 BCE, but who eventually migrated into Europe and Asia in about 1500BCE. Because they spoke a language that would form the basis of many Asiatic and European tongues, they also often go by the name of Indo-Europeans. They are often credited with introducing Vedic culture to India[3] One would be struggling to postulate the origins of *ahiṃsā* amongst these early Vedic peoples. All the literary and archaeological evidence we have seems to suggest that they were generally speaking a raucous lot, into drinking, gambling, fighting and carrying out animal sacrifice. As Alsdorf notes:

> "The Aryans, whose immigration during the middle of the second millennium BCE is the crucial event in Indian history, are presented in their ancient literature as meat-eaters, who certainly did not shrink from slaughtering and consuming their numerous cattle." (Alsdorf, 1962 [2010]: 2)

This actually presents us with something of a puzzle. How and why did such a strong ethic of *ahiṃsā* arise in such a culture? One thing is for sure, it didn't happen overnight, and as the centuries passed and as we move into the later Vedic period we begin to see a progressive internalisation of ritual. Animal sacrifice begins to fall out of favour, along with other elements of ritual violence and aggression. This process came of age in the scriptures known as the *Upaniṣads*, also called the Vedanta or 'end of the Vedas'. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣhad*, usually dated to around the 7th or 8th century BCE, we find the earliest known reference to the concept of *ahiṃsā* (3:17) where it is listed as one of the five essential virtues.[4] However, here *ahiṃsā* only extends so far, as the text later (8:15) goes on to state that one who practices *ahiṃsā* towards all 'living beings' *except at holy places*, or in another translation, *except as approved by the scriptures*, escapes the cycle of rebirth. This evidently suggests that violence towards animals at such holy places or by scripturally approved means was still considered apropos.

It is only with the growth of the *śramaṇa* movements that the concept of *ahiṃsā* really begins to take off. These were groups of heterodox renunciates which began to emerge from about the 6th century BCE onwards, and which include Jainism and Buddhism, amongst others. Much has been made of the centrality of the concept of *ahiṃsā* in Buddhist thought, such as in the *pañcasīlāni* or five ethical precepts of Buddhism, where the non-harming of living creatures comes top of the list. However,

[3] There has been much debate about the Aryan settlement of India. Some, including yoga scholars such as David Frawley, Subhash Kak and Georg Feuerstein (1995) even deny that it took place, arguing that it was the indigenous people of India who were solely responsible for Vedic religion and culture. This is not the place to go deeply into this heated debate, but for an excellent, unbiased and clearheaded summary of both sides the best source I have found is Bryant (2001).

[4] The other four being *tapas* (austerity), dāna (alms-giving) *ārjava* (honesty), and *satyavachanam* (truthfulness). Note the similarities (and differences) with the much later *yamas* and *niyamas* of Patañjali.

textual evidence seems to suggest that these ancient Buddhists, including the Buddha himself, frequently partook in the eating of meat. As Alsdorf notes:

> "Nevertheless, it is, to begin with, absolutely certain that the Buddha was not a vegetarian and did not forbid meat-eating to his monks either… there is no doubt that the Master and his disciples, as the texts report, ate also meat on numerous occasions when they were invited to the houses of the laity." (Alsdorf, 1962 [2010]: 4)

The crucial distinction here is that between the harming of living creatures by oneself, which is obviously frowned upon if you are a Buddhist monk, and the intake of the flesh of creatures harmed by others, namely laypeople. As the Buddha himself is reported to have said[5], fish and meat are pure under three conditions: when the monk has not seen, nor heard and has no suspicion that the animal was killed on purpose for him. This might sound like pretty dodgy ground to some. After all, in modern times, the only reason that most people can continue to eat meat and animal products is by conveniently erasing from their mind the violence that has been undertaken by others to get that food to their plate. Be that as it may, for some Buddhists this policy of eating meat offered by the laity continues right up to the present day. In addition to this ambivalent attitude to meat eating, Vegan blogger Rama Ganesan argues that much of the Buddhist scripture (along with most other ancient Indian scripture I might add) is basically highly speciesist:

> "Most important, Buddhism does say that misspent human life means being reborn as an animal - implying that it is a lesser birth. Buddhism says that the human birth is 'precious', but not that a cow birth is precious, or a bee birth, or a snail birth… Buddhism might talk about compassion and loving-kindness and karuna, but they are only talking about humans." (Ganesan, 2015)

The school of Jainism seems to be somewhat more steadfast and consistent in its commitment to *ahiṃsā*. For the Jains, each human being had a *jīva* or soul, which was luminous, blissful, and intelligent. However, animals, plants, water, fire, air, and even rocks and stones each had *jīvas* too. All beings must therefore be treated with the same courtesy and respect that we would wish to receive ourselves. These early Jains became aware at a profound level that even apparently inert entities, such as stones, had a *jīva* and were capable of pain, and that no living creature wished to suffer, any more than they themselves did. The entire life of the Jain was centred around *ahiṃsā.* In addition to not intentionally killing or harming animals, Jain monks had to move with consummate caution lest they inavertedly squashed an insect or trampled on a blade of grass. They were required to lay down objects with care, and were forbidden to move around in the darkness, when it would be easy to damage another precious creature.[6]

Of course, the Jains were realistic enough to realise that some degree of harming was necessary to simply survive; eating necessarily involves the talking of life, even if vegetable. They thus crafted an elaborate hierarchy of life-forms which was essentially based on the capacity for sensation and consciousness that each life-form was considered to possess, with human beings at the top and more lowly things like worms and plants towards the bottom. Again, this could be seen as a form of speciesism. However, this hierarchy helped to prioritize which offenses against life were most serious and prescribed how best to minimize violence. Whenever it become clear, however, that the life of a Jain was coming to a natural end, they were encouraged to accept and embrace their imminent death through engaging in a final fast, facilitating their own demise in such a way that no

[5] In the Cullavagga of the Theravāda Vinaya, basically an elaboration of etiquette and duties for monks.
[6] The rules for the lay community of Jains were less strict than those for monks.

further harming would be caused. Indeed, this *sallekhanā* or fast unto death was considered to be the most auspicious way that a life can end, pretty much securing an end to the cycle of rebirth.

However, having said all of this, once again Alsdorf finds canonical evidence which seems to testify to the eating of meat by Mahavira, the very founder of the religion himself! For example, there is an instance in which a seriously sick Mahavira sends one of his disciples to the laywomen for the leftovers of some cock-meat which had been killed by a cat. Mahavira apparently recovered quickly having eaten the cock-meat. If we accept this testimony as truthful, one has to assume that the eating of meat was again considered okay so long as the actual harming had not been performed by oneself or purposefully and solely on behalf of oneself, just as in the Buddhist case. The injunction placed upon these monks was not against the eating of meat per se but against the actual act of harming living beings, an act which would of course have very negative karmic repercussions.

There is plenty more ground that we could cover, for example, the *Mahābhārata* epic and its well-known *Bhagavad Gītā* portion contain plenty of important material regarding the concept of ahiṃsā. However, this essay is not meant to be an exhaustive survey of ahiṃsā[7]. As you may have noticed by now, little has been said of veganism so far. And the reason for this is pretty simple. I have never seen any direct and specific recommendations for the practice of veganism in any ancient scripture. For all their endorsement of ahiṃsā, neither Buddhism nor Jainism advocated veganism, and as we have just seen it does not appear that these renunciates were even strict vegetarians! Next then, we turn to the classical Yoga tradition associated with Patañjali. Do we come any closer to seeing clear arguments for veganism here, and if this turns out to be not the case, can we nevertheless extend the rubric and logic of the *Yoga Sūtras* to build a solid case for veganism for the modern yogi?

Vegetarianism and Veganism in Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras

Yoga had been around in one form or another for many centuries before Patañjali came along and systematised the teachings in a work known as the *Yoga Sūtras*. Most scholars nowadays date this text to shortly after the turn of the Common Era, somewhere between the 2nd and 5th centuries CE. The term *sūtra* literally means a thread and essentially refers to a succinct, pithy philosophical statement in which the maximum amount of information is packed into the minimum number of words. In total there are about 1200 words in the text contained in just 195 *sūtras*. This succinctness of the *Yoga Sūtras* indicates that they were understood to be a manual requiring unpacking, and this is exactly what the many commentaries that have been written over the centuries attempt to provide. In modern times our understanding of Patañjali's text is completely dependent upon the interpretations of these later commentators, particularly the *bhāṣya* or commentary of Vyāsa.[8] This is particularly important to understand for the purposes of this article, as this commentary provides very strong support for the unequivocal requirement of vegetarianism for the Patañjalian yogi.

The main portion in which the argument for vegetarianism appears strongest is in the famous *aṣṭāṅga* or 'eight-limbed' yoga of chapter two. This is particularly significant as it is this *aṣṭāṅga* yoga portion of the *Sūtras* that is by far the well most well-known and which many modern yogis base, or allege to base, their practice upon. The very first *yama* or restraint given in the very first limb of this eight-limbed yoga is that of *ahiṃsā* or non-harming. This is not down to pure chance. All commentators seem to agree that it is this founding principle of *ahiṃsā* upon which the rest of the yoga edifice is built. Vyāsa's *bhāṣya* or commentary claims that "the other abstentions and

[7] See Alsdorf (1962) [2010], Schmidt (1968) and a little more recently Chapple (1993) for classic surveys of the history of *ahiṃsā* within Hinduism.

[8] Some scholars argue that Patañjali and Vyāsa are one and the same person. See the work of Philipp Maas.

observances are rooted in it" as are the other limbs. The clear message here is that making significant progress on the yogic path requires that we are the very least making a sincere and determined effort to abide by *ahiṃsā*.

These *yamas* are listed in *YS 2.30*. In the very next *sūtra*, something very unusual occurs. Here, Patañjali devotes an entire *sūtra* to reiterating just how central and non-negotiable these *yamas* are, and how they constitute a *māhavratam* or 'great vow' for the yogi. I say unusual because you simply do not see Patañjali being so dogmatic and assertive anywhere else in the *Sūtras* and the fact that he includes a whole precious extra *sūtra* to do so is telling. It's almost as though he knew wannabe yogis would try and wiggle out of it someway or another! Here is the *sūtra* in full:

> "[These yamas] are considered the great vow. They are not exempted by one's class, place, time or circumstance. They are universal." *YS 2.31*

So, regardless of your social status, and regardless of where you live, in which time period you live, and other extenuating circumstances (such as your career), adherence to the *yamas*, including especially *ahiṃsā*, the foundation of them all, is the sine quo non of being a yogi as defined by Patanjali's system. Vyāsa is equally emphatic in his *bhāṣya*, and it is here that the link between *ahiṃsā* and vegetarianism is explicitly and unequivocally made, and several examples are brought to bear. The example of the fisherman rebuffs any suggestion that an individual's livelihood and sustenance might justify acts of slaughter. Note that Vyāsa isn't necessarily saying here that no one should become a fisherman but that one cannot be both a yogi *and* a fisherman, or hunter, or work in an abattoir etc. A fisherman can't get out of the restriction by saying that he will kill only fish and nothing else. Nor can the hunter say he will kill only in certain locations. Nor can the ritualist say that he will only kill on certain days or only for certain gods. *Ahiṃsā* and the other *yamas* that constitute the great vow are absolutely unconditional for the yogi, no matter the circumstances.

One may wonder here if the restriction here is on all meat-eating or per se, or whether the eating of flesh might be acceptable if the actual act of killing had been performed by another. Well, a little further on, Patañjali address this issue in this very interesting *sūtra*:

> "Dubious thoughts such as harming, etc., whether committed by oneself, for oneself, or approved of, preceded by greed, anger, or delusion, and mild, medium, intense, result in unending suffering and ignorance - this is a consideration of the opposite." *YS 2.34*

This is an extremely nuanced probing of the concept of *ahiṃsā*. In this *sūtra* Patañjali is following his line of argument to an extreme that even most modern vegetarians and vegans seem reluctant to consider. Here, the *Sūtras* are clearly stating that not only must one refrain from harming by one's own hand, but she or he cannot have the harming performed by another, and nor can she or he approve of or assent to an environment in which acts of harming are carried out. Not only does the practice of *ahiṃsā* in the *Yoga Sūtras* mandate the unconditional renunciation of all flesh eating, it appears to stretch to a withdrawal of consent for the societal practice of killing and harming.

Take a moment to think about this. Taking this *sūtra* at its word would mean, as a yogi, refraining from supporting in any way any establishment that causes harm to living beings. For the committed vegan, this would mean abstaining from patronising any supermarket or restaurant that continues to sell meat or animal products. For the modern wannabe yogi, this is quite a tall order. We live in such a complex world, and almost every aspect of our lives, from our banks, to the electronic equipment we use, to the suppliers of our gas and electricity, all are embroiled in a messy and complex network of harm. One would surely have to disappear off into the forest and live totally self-sustainably to minimise one's footprint of harm, and that, of course, *is* exactly what these renunciate yogis did do!

Before we move on let us examine again *sūtra 2.34* above. This *sūtra* continues its subtle exploration of *ahiṃsā*, identifying three basic motivations for harming (greed, anger and delusion) and then three possible intensities (mild, medium and intense). The *sūtra* then boldly links the practice of *hiṃsā* or harming with 'unending suffering and ignorance', the very things that the whole yoga edifice is designed to eliminate. Harming in *any* form then (including the consent to societal harming discussed above) is therefore completely antithetical to one's progress on the path of yoga, and moreover, ultimately leads in the opposite direction, towards greater pain and ignorance.

Having demonstrated that a strong case for vegetarianism can be found in the *Yoga Sūtras* and the accompanying *bhāṣya,* to what extent does the text suggest that the practice of *ahiṃsā* extends beyond meat-eating to other uses of animals and their products? Well, it certainly extends to the use of animal skins, particularly if their procurement requires the execution of animals. The example of hides is included in the *bhāṣya* and given almost equal weight as the consumption of flesh. However, when it comes to edible animal products such as milk, honey and eggs, the commentators remain silent. Indeed, in later yogic texts, we actually find honey and milk listed as *sattvic* or pure foods recommended for the yogi![9] From a textual and historical perspective, one has to come to the conclusion that the extraction and consumption of dairy and other animal products were not considered violations of non-harming.

To explain why this was so one might suggest that cows manipulated for dairy products during this time period were treated with care and respect and not routinely slaughtered once their productivity ceased. Nevertheless, a contemporary proponent of veganism could convincingly argue that *hiṃsā* not only involves slaughter but also the forced servitude imposed upon cows for their milk (or bees for their honey), no matter how 'humanely' the animals are treated. The claim here would be that *any* enslavement, confinement, mutilation, manipulation, or any use of animals as means rather than ends in themselves, constitutes a form of *hiṃsā.* Animal agriculture as a whole is predicated on the forced manipulation of animals for human benefit, and as this inherently involves harming the animals it amounts to a transgression of *ahiṃsā*. Be this as it may, I have seen no evidence historically to suggest that a link was ever made between consumption of animal products and *ahiṃsā*, and it does vegans little service trying to rewrite history to suit their values.

A further point can be made at this juncture. A vegan might argue that the *yama* or restraint of non-stealing (*asteya*) applies to the forcible extraction of milk, eggs, and honey from animals who naturally produce and 'own' these substances. As stealing substantiates a tributary form of harming according to *YS 2.30*, and these substances are produced for intraspecies purposes, human appropriation can be viewed as a form of stealing and thus harming. A hypothetical opponent may contend that according to the *Sūtras*, stealing is simply described as the "improper taking-for-one's-own the things of another". 'Improper' is the key term here and the *bhāṣya* defines 'improper' as "not authorized by sacred texts". Hence, a vegan must demonstrate that the sacred texts affirm that milk, eggs, and honey 'properly' belong to cows, chickens, and bees, respectively. If this cannot be proven (and it is unlikely) and the extraction of these substances is not considered 'improper' by the sacred texts, then from a textual, historical perspective there exists no conclusive instances of theft. Of course, one could go further, and claim that the sacred texts must be wrong then! This may well be, but once again there is no value in trying to rewrite history, only highlight and accept its shortcomings and begin building a better future.

[9] I am thinking primarily of Haṭha yoga texts such as the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* where milk, ghee and honey are all highly praised as beneficial to the yogi.

It is now time to return to the starting point of this essay and provide some answers to the questions which I posed there:

1) Is there any evidence for the endorsement or practice of veganism within the school of yoga or related Indic spiritual traditions?

As a scholar, one simply has to be honest here and reply negatively. I have not seen evidence of any pre-modern practice of veganism, either in India or elsewhere. There is of course ample evidence of vegetarianism amongst yogis, Jains and some Buddhists in the Indian tradition (though as we have seen there is clear historical evidence of meat-eating amongst the latter group) and also in the wider global context, such as amongst the Pythagoreans. But this does not hold true for veganism, though I am hardly an expert in this field and welcome hearing about any evidence which points towards early veganism. With regards to why this may be, well, as previously mentioned, one could easily suggest that in pre-modern societies such as ancient India the animals from which products were extracted were so respected and cared for that the notion that obtaining and consuming such products could constitute a form of harm was simply unthinkable.

As to why we hear nothing of veganism from yogic sources, another line of argument one could take is to say that, despite the way they are often portrayed, these ancient yogis (and other ascetics) were human and imperfect and that, like many humans today, they were unable or unwilling to take their arguments and principles to their logical, ethical conclusion (i.e. a complete end to animal servitude and the use of animals as means rather than ends in themselves). Whichever line of argument one takes, let us take care not to rewrite history, nor try to forcibly reframe other religions and cultures according to our own specifications, or to better our match our image of what we *think* they should be like. Though yoga is not a religion, the following quote by Ganesan is salutary here:

> "But when Western people take a religion like Hinduism and insist that it conform to their specifications, that is cultural appropriation. Hinduism is not vegan. Buddhism is not vegan. Even Jainism is not vegan. Yet many vegans (and even non-vegans) are particularly incensed that this particular Hindu 'saint' eats dairy. Or that Tibetan lama eats meat." (Ganesan, 2015)

2) If not, then can the arguments put forward in these traditions nevertheless be extended to build a strong contemporary case for veganism amongst aspiring modern yogis?

I would say this is the case absolutely. In modern times, most people (vegan, vegetarian, or otherwise) would hopefully, at the very minimum, concur that the mass manipulation and slaughter of animals that occurs on present day 'factory farms' substantiates a blatant violation of non-harming. Even so-called 'humane' farming constitutes a non-consensual use of animals that amounts to enslavement and a perception of animals as merely means as opposed to ends. The truth is, given that we cannot speak each other's languages, we can never truly gain 'consent' from another animal for taking and using their products (and isn't it strange that we use the word 'product' at all, a word normally reserved for man-made artefacts intended for sale?) and therefore does this not constitute a clear infringement of *asteya* or non-stealing? Given all of this, it is my view that whatever the historical and textual evidence (or lack thereof) for veganism in the yoga tradition may be, in the modern context there is a very strong case indeed for veganism amongst anyone purporting to follow *ahiṃsā* and the yoga of Patañjali

3) Finally, in the modern context, does one have to be vegan in order to practice yoga?

I think this question needs to be preceded by the following one: Does one have to be vegan (or vegetarian) in order to *begin* practicing yoga? The answer to this is surely no, for this would be to put

the cart before the horse. One can make some progress on the yogic path whilst still continuing to consume meat and animal products. Nevertheless, I would argue that this progress has a limit. If one is sincere in their practice, there comes a point in the path when one can no longer countenance causing intentional harm to other living creatures, directly or indirectly, though this point comes sooner for some than others of course. How can one truly reside in one's true nature, in the pure joy of awareness, if one is living with the knowledge of causing pain and suffering to other creatures?

Let us move now to the question as posed. A large percentage of contemporary yoga practitioners (largely outside India) regard the *Yoga Sūtras* as the textual and philosophical foundation of their *sādhana* or practice[10]. As should be clear by now, if one alleges loyalty to some form of Patañjala yoga, then the goal of an unconditional vegetarian diet at minimum must be strongly prioritized. There is no way to reconcile the *Yoga Sūtras* with a conscious decision to kill, have killed, or approve of the killing of an animal for human consumption. A more nuanced interpretation of the text could argue for the refusal even to support any non-vegetarian establishments, and also the need to adopt veganism in order to satisfy non-harming and non-stealing to satisfactory degrees in the modern era. Yoga scholar Edwin Bryant makes the case about as strongly and concisely as it can be made:

> "Without following *ahiṃsā,* one can not claim to be following the Yoga of Patañjali, or of any other of ancient India's soteriological spiritual traditions". (Bryant: 2011)

Given everything we have discussed I have to agree with Bryant's assessment, and would further assert that all those claiming to be serious yogis must sincerely strive to make their diet (as well as all other aspects of life) as harm-free as possible, and yes, this means making veganism, or at the very, very least vegetarianism, an urgent goal of their practice.

Lokāḥ Samastāḥ Sukhino Bhavantu

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[10] Why this should be the case is an interesting study in itself, for most modern yoga seems to have very little to do with the yoga of Patañjali! But this issue is beyond the scope of the present essay.