



TOUCH THE PROCESS

As I have indicated, spiritual vegetarianism encounters two main obstacles: many vegetarians say they do not have a spiritual practice; many with a spiritual practice have no interest in vegetarianism. While we may ask what might be gained by a dialogue between us, let us ask instead what is lost when there is no exchange. Many vegetarians don't realize they have a spiritual practice when, in fact, they do; while many with a spiritual practice haven't cultivated their ability to adopt vegetarianism, which is more integral to their spirituality than they think.

As with any other spiritual practice, vegetarianism begins with attention and discipline and evolves into a habit that feels natural. Vegetarians bring attention to the process of choosing food; we remember, we don't just react; we make connections, we don't just consume. Vegetarians enact the same insights that arise during meditation—that all beings are interconnected. Vegetarianism, I believe, is meditation in action.

While other practices may be skipped for a day or more, eating is a necessity that, unless you are fasting, happens more than once a day. Uniting a practice with a necessity catalyzes the process of becoming aware of things, or intentional. It catalyzes it because if you choose to be intentional you are given, at least three times a day, the opportunity to enact and experience intentionality.

Let's make this concrete:

“Don't you want a piece of that [___]?” the mind asks you at a celebration.

“No, I don’t,” another part of you says.

“It looks pretty good,” the mind beckons.

“It has [meat, eggs, milk] in it,” another part of you says.

“So what?” the mind queries.

“I am perfectly happy knowing I can make a good vegan [__],” you tell it. “I can make one when I get home if I want to,” you remind it. “You are only *part* of who I am. There is something more important here. I am not going to let you determine who I am.”

“Are you sure?” the mind responds. “That [__] looks pretty good.”

“Yes, but it exists because of the suffering of animals. To eat this piece of [__] implicates me in that system.”

“You’ve got me on that,” it concedes and moves its attention elsewhere.

Like many spiritual practitioners, vegetarians discipline their mind. The mind knows our weaknesses and appeals directly to them since it, more than the stomach, is cued to the stimuli of the outside world. Before I practice yoga, my mind gets a little frantic. “But you need to check your email first,” it insists. Or it tempts: “Just a peek at today’s headlines. These won’t deter you really,” it advises. But I know that what is really going on is that the mind doesn’t want to lose control. It wants to continue its own self-absorbed dialogue. “What do you think of that?” it asks, as I settle into *The New York Times*. My mind wants to stay hooked to the outside world and it does so by exploiting a central weakness. In my case it is a fear that I’m missing something. Because of my vegetarianism and other spiritual practices, I now know this is one way the conditioned mind battles for control, and I take comfort that my mind knows me so well. “Later,” I tell it, knowing that “later” might mean “never.”

What nonvegetarians and even those with their own spiritual practice may not recognize is that the same overactive mind that distracts a meditator and tries to carry on its own dialogue tries to distract the vegetarian. A meditator doesn’t cling to a thought that’s entered her mind; she acknowledges it as a thought and returns to focusing on her breath. A vegetarian does the same. Both recognize that even though the conditioned mind’s experience of reality is limited, this mind wants to maintain control. The temptation is to let it.

Both the meditator and the vegetarian do not succumb to that temptation. They know that reality is larger than that thought or that piece of [___]. The problem for many people is that the piece of [___] may appear a lot more substantial than the thought distracting the meditator. But they are the same temptation, and they both require a mind that knows how to bring attentiveness to the living of one's life.

Every spiritual quest involves temptation. Stories of the temptation of Jesus Christ or the Buddha make temptation sound very dramatic and the subsequent responses to those temptations revelatory. But in today's world the temptations may manifest themselves in seemingly undramatic ways—decisions about lunch and then again about dinner. The voice is not of some disembodied or powerful agent of attachment, it's the voice of your best friend or your co-worker: "Come on, one fish fry won't matter."

Spiritual practice requires that we involve ourselves. We need not only to place our trust in the process of vegetarianism or spiritual practice, but we need to touch this process and let it touch us. We need to allow ourselves to become immersed. When we don't trust the process, it may be because we're not touching it.

Touching is how you practice your spiritual path. If it is yoga, you practice; if it is vegetarianism, you choose your food accordingly; if it is keeping a journal, you write. *Touching the process is the practicing of the practice*; you touch the process to let the process touch you. These are body-related practices; they involve us. We cannot be spectators to our own spiritual growth.

BECOMING A VEGETARIAN IS TOUCHING THE PROCESS

When you become a vegetarian, you learn how to cultivate and live with attention. Vegetarians do this by bringing their vegetarian awareness to each activity, again and again. It is a process. The root of the process is the focusing of energy so vegetarians can make a promise and keep it. The process involves examining the same issues that are embedded within spiritual quests: Who am I? How do I constitute my self? What is desire for wholeness and what is a craving for gratification? Am I isolated from others or do I sense connection?

When we touch the process, we bring to our conscious mind our previously unexamined contact with the world. Usually, this awareness manifests itself in those aspects of our life most in need of healing and repairing. In touching the process, we let the process become a part of us. We interact with it, first as an external goal, than as an enacted goal, an inner reality. When it comes to vegetarianism, touching the process is epitomized by being aware of what we are literally taking into our bodies as food.

As with any spiritual practice, becoming a vegetarian requires keeping promises we make to ourselves. The process of focusing energy so we can make a promise and then keep it can feel hard. It feels hard because we're not used to bringing this amount of attention to something like eating. My own story attests to how hard it felt! Only when I changed roommates and expressly selected vegetarian-feminists did I stop eating meat. Later, when becoming a vegan, I was able to bring the knowledge I had gained about changing my diet in 1974 to my desire to give up dairy and eggs. I understood my susceptibilities. Even so, I continued to eat cheese pizzas for a couple of years after switching to soymilk. Each time, I asked myself: "Why am I *still* eating what I decided I didn't want to eat? What causes me to falter?" The answer directed me to my own neediness. We're all needy in some way. Vegetarianism required me to examine my own neediness. I had to identify how it was at work in issues about food, and I had to figure out how to respond to them.

The process of becoming vegetarian introduces us to the self we didn't necessarily know we were. You encounter both love and torments. You love yourself for following your heart; you feel tormented because you are following your heart. The torments arise as you learn more about yourself: how much you are attached to foods you know aren't good for you, or how hard it is to give up foods that are the result of so much suffering. You discover how trivial your food needs are and get embarrassed by how resentful you feel when you're "cheated" out of the food you want: "So I really am *that* needy when it comes to food!" Or worse: "So I really am *that* petty!" I felt constricted and cheated at times. Then I connected to the multiple reasons for being vegetarian, and I experienced love cultivating itself in me. Love filled the place where I felt constricted and dissolved that feeling.

As I tried to become a vegetarian, I touched the process of *being* a vegetarian. It revealed its intrinsic joys and taught me how to become more attentive and careful with myself.

1) Growing Vegetarian Roots: Ask a Vegetarian

Ask a vegetarian to tell you the story about why and how she or he became a vegetarian. Breathe deeply and welcome the words, telling yourself that their process is not a reflection on you. Be aware if you start to feel judged. Release those feelings. Simply hear their story. Follow the thread of their vegetarian consciousness. Don't interrupt. Thank them.

QUALITIES OF TOUCHING THE PROCESS

Attention

The night before I became a vegetarian, I went out to dinner with my mother and a friend. My mother took us to some fancy steak house in Cambridge. Being a sentimental type, I was saying my good-byes to my identity as a meat eater and decided that I was going to eat my last meal of meat consciously. As I looked at the steak, I was aware that this was the last time I'd be eating a steak. In thinking that, my mind immediately asked me why I was even eating this steak. Internally, I had begun to shift to vegetarianism because I was bringing attention to my eating habits.

This is what attention is: the awareness that awakens us to meaning in our actions.

When we bring attention to our eating practice, we place attention between what we see and what we eat. We don't accept the category "food" as we have been conditioned to view it. At first, when I became a vegetarian and was offered meat, I became aware of my attention, which announced: "This is not meat, this is a dead animal." Such conscious placement of attention was necessary as I crossed over from one identity to another.

Intention

Attention leads to *intention*. I bring my attention, say, to my craving for chocolate. There may be an external cue—everyone is eating a double chocolate cake. There may be an internal cue—I am fantasizing about a double chocolate cake. With attention, I can approach these cues without attachment, without expecting that in the end it is inevitable I will have to eat the double chocolate cake. I do not have to be attached to the cake. Instead, I can allow awareness to process what it is I'm responding to and feeling. For instance, the chocolate cake may represent a need to be sweet to myself, to take care of myself. While I use chocolate cake as an example, it could be any food. I want to emphasize that intention does not mean stoicism; we're not talking about the imposition of limitations or denial. Attention means we can suspend attachment; by suspending attachment, we create the space for intention. I can then act intentionally toward an item of food. Not needing to "have" it, I don't eat it.

Detachment

Intention enables *detachment*. Detachment means not being product-oriented. At times, it may not feel like detachment—we feel desire for a food and yet we know we don't want to eat it. But when we've cultivated detachment, we know that messages from the senses—from the stomach or our mouth or the nose—do not need to be identified with. We know we *have hunger*, rather than *are hungry*; we have desires, but our identity is not those desires. We are able to separate our feelings from our sense of ourselves. We watch them arise and we watch them fall away.

Once more, I want to stress that I'm not saying we force ourselves to go hungry. Quite the opposite: we don't force anything! We care for ourselves. In cultivating detachment, we simply recognize that, if we experience craving for something, we don't confuse that craving with ourselves. We don't *have* to identify with the desire; we don't *have* to think that this is a defining aspect of ourselves. This is detachment.

Detachment changes consciousness. Some "foods" simply cease to be seen as food. My consciousness does not experience meat as food. There is no process of attraction and examination of this attraction when meat is present. There is no beckoning. While there is a sadness for the world

because it is still creating and consuming meat, I know I can detach from that feeling too. Of course, I am aware that there is meat, and I feel a complex of disturbing thoughts. I realize that my attention is there with the dead animal. Then I call that attention back inside me. I am not controlled by what has been put on the table.

Attention, intention, and detachment are basic ingredients in a spiritual practice. Through vegetarianism, I have learned how to bring them into my life. The process has touched me, and it will touch you.

THE BENEFITS OF A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

My partner Bruce makes stained-glass windows. One window he created, "Our Town," faces the rising sun. In one corner of the window, the glass sun rises in a glorious splendor of reds, oranges, and yellows. In the opposite corner, the earth, shaped in the Chinese symbol of yin and yang, hovers in space. In the middle, a large star made of chandelier crystal ornaments is positioned. Around the star are old glass negatives. One shows two young children, another two dogs, another a woman. In the top corner above the earth shines the moon, made of stones that were once weights in floral arrangements. In the morning, when the rising sun shines through the stained glass rising sun, a glorious stream of colored light dances toward me. A little later in the morning, the sun hits the crystal star and it sparkles. The moonstones create a soft glow; the negatives cause a light reversal.

Through my spiritual practices, my own qualities have been burnished. Sometimes, like Bruce's sun, I radiate energy; sometimes, like his star, I refract it. Sometimes I am able to reverse things. Through my spiritual practice, I have experienced that the universe is "my town." I am connected to all that is.

Not having to dominate my feelings allows me to experience connections. Once feelings are able to be encountered, then we can be in touch with our feelings about animals. I am able to let love grow in me. My capacity to care is increased. I don't need to judge emotions, only be aware of them. I realize that unwanted emotions are not bad, they are simply unwanted.

Widening and Deepening

A window frame, a book on a bookshelf, an upside-down capital letter “T”—whenever I see a horizontal line meet a vertical line, I am reminded of the benefits of spiritual practice.

The process I’m undergoing is one of widening: in ability and in flexibility. I experience abundance within myself and without. I am not so “narrow.” I am not so threatened by things. My “narrow-mindedness” is transformed. My spiritual practices allow me to feel my way through an experience and to allow another to do the same. I can be patient, more receptive, and more able to bring more things into my life. This is foundational work, and applies to everyone. When we are grounded, we can receive.

Just as yoga practice extends me (people often literally grow because yoga practice allows the spine to extend), spiritual practice helps me grow. I am being stretched. I try new things. I can be more empathetic, more flexible in spirit. I can reach out. The same is true of all of us. Because we are grounded, we can grow, we can extend vertically.

Becoming the Nonanxious Person

The gift that vegetarianism offers is that we can follow the process of awareness and not cut it off when we discover what is happening to animals on this planet. Nonvegetarians are often aware they are eating an animal who was killed for them, and then stop that thought: “I don’t want to think about that right now.” This means that a dissonance in spirit, mind, and body exists. Activists without a spiritual practice may also experience anxiety. When this happens, whether for vegetarians or nonvegetarians, energy becomes blocked. They cannot allow the process to touch them, because they don’t think they can change. I know what happens to blocked energy. It creates anxiety.

Anxiety is nervous and unanchored energy, a drumroll of worries and excuses. Anyone who is anxious knows its familiar signs. Anxiety is words in your head, tightness in your belly, and no connection with your energy center. Anxiety pretends it is an authentic feeling; in fact, it kills what is authentic. Anxiety takes one’s feeling of freedom and reduces it to “decisions.” Anxiety is energy that short-circuits itself, causing our energy to spin round and round, making its focus smaller and smaller. Anxiety is only

superficially about inner processes; it takes all the inner energy and focuses it on an object instead of on a process. Anxiety fears loss—that aching, painful, hollow feeling where something should be. Anxiety is misfocused energy before the act. It is the experience of having expectations and fearing they won't be met. Anxiety often keeps us from changing. Anxiety holds on rather than releasing. When we touch the process, we release anxiety and heal our anxious self. Peace is connected to inner energy; anxiety divides it.

People share their anxieties with me when they describe why they aren't vegetarians or why they haven't adopted a spiritual practice. I was thinking about this when I went for a walk with my friend Pat, a professor of pastoral care. She was discussing an upcoming visit that she expected would be stressful.

As we walked through the fall leaves, she sighed and said: "My students are always quoting me, 'As Professor Davis says: "Be the nonanxious person." ' " She paused. "I wish *I* could be the nonanxious person when my friend is here."

"*Nonanxious person*," I said. "What an interesting concept. What does it mean exactly?"

"It's the role of the counselor, according to family therapy," Pat replied. "The counselor is the nonanxious person."

I listened and let the words "nonanxious person" roll around my mind. I understood what was so appealing about the idea: the fruits of a spiritual practice are that you can be a nonanxious person with yourself.

We vegetarians and spiritual practitioners can be that nonanxious person because we've learned not to be afraid of following the process. We can be aware of our energy because we're willing to follow it. We're willing to take maximum responsibility for our own emotional well-being and our life. This, too, is touching the process. What energy is before me? What energy is within me? Where does my energy direct me?

The anxious person asks: "Who will take care of me?" The answer is: "I must take care of myself." The answer is: "I am worth taking care of."

Learning to Become Fluid

In much of life, we experience ourselves as solid. In this, we confuse our outer self with our complete self. We often respond to things out of this confusion, compounding our tendency to solidity by freezing in that space.

I notice this as a parent. A part of me holds on to the idea that I must be solid and firm with my children. But as I free myself from needing to be this way, I can interact with my children more freely. I don't have to be locked into a solution, demand, or a requirement. I can respond to them as well as expect them to respond to me. When I cling to a "no" answer in response to a request from them, I am able to catch myself thinking: "Why am I saying no?" My first instinct is conditioned by my expectations and projections about what my children need to be doing or, more accurately, what they don't need to be doing. But I'm able to halt that process of solidifying. I ask myself: "Why am I holding to that position?" I understand that I can be wrong. I feel myself becoming more fluid.

Spiritual practices teach us not to identify with that separating, judging, dualistic mind. This is what fluidity is.

Anyone who is an activist should examine how she experiences herself as solid versus fluid. Often we are most solid when we are confrontational, and we need to ask what we gain from being confrontational. If we are merely confirming our own sense of righteousness, then we are being solid. When something solid meets another solid, there's little movement. We need to be a catalyst for growth, and this is best achieved by being fluid.

Healing Fearfulness

Fear prevents us from loving ourselves. We fear being judged and found incomplete; we fear others. When a sense of danger is present, we experience fear not anxiety; we become frightened about something or someone. If there is something dangerous threatening us, we need to determine how to respond. But often the fear response misfires. Although there is no danger, we are geared to fear. To counter fear we have to love the part of ourselves that fears.

Dreams teach us about our fears. We are the playwrights and the dream is the stage on which we script our fear—whether it is of separation, failure, being in love, or of not being loved. Mistriggered fear, like anxiety, is a

distraction from the present moment. Fear keeps us from being present to ourselves.

We may lodge fear in our psoas muscle—part of a group of flexor muscles that, according to Liz Koch, “contracts whenever the fear reflex fires.” Unless we release that muscle, we won’t release the fear that keeps us frozen and frightened of ourselves and others. The psoas muscle is an unusual muscle because it unites the upper and lower parts of our body, connecting the rib cage and trunk to the legs. It does not attach to the pelvis itself, but passes through it. It is at the core of the body. As Liz Koch describes it: “The psoas resides where our gut feelings are felt.” The psoas muscle, she explains, has “a powerful unifying function,” because it has a “vital and dynamic interrelationship” with the diaphragm, organs, nerves, and blood.

The psoas muscle requires release. Then it can lengthen. The *avasasana* position, described in “Opening Our Doors to the Source of Our Being” (pages 66–68) releases the psoas muscle. This is especially important for activists, since protest often demands that we stand. In standing we often experience a range of emotions around the issue we’re protesting and the interactions with people who disagree with us. The emotional tension from confrontation may be stored in the psoas.

When we contract our muscles and teach ourselves to live with contracted muscles, we close off the ability to process fear and other emotions that are being experienced. Because it is located so deeply within us, the psoas is also a metaphor for what is happening in our spiritual practice. To release the psoas muscle is a way of touching our depth.

Learning to Think Symbolically

Spiritual practices help us interpret the world in a more symbolic manner. This is important because our right and left brains take in information in very different ways. The conscious mind works through being ceaselessly verbal. It manages information through a hum of words and word associations that the conscious mind structures. On the other hand, the unconscious mind is nonverbal. When the conscious and unconscious minds encounter symbols and metaphors, both halves work together.

If I hear on the radio that two whales are stranded in some ice, I create a picture in my mind of the whales swimming around, trapped; I envision

the cold. I also think about what this means, and why these two particular whales are caught. The conscious mind has questions; the unconscious mind, associations. When encountering a symbol or metaphor, the conscious and the unconscious respond to it along different tracks, until suddenly—and often with a feeling of “aha!”—they come together and we “know” something. We experience a connection and something opens up that wasn’t there before.

Symbols transform conscious awareness by connecting us to a larger reality. When we think symbolically we can detach from the need for a product, from the need to be future oriented, from a solid ego. Instead, we experience the joy of connections in the present time. The “aha!” reorients us.

Embracing Impermanence

Part of the human dilemma is that we defend ourselves against impermanence. We are afraid of our own deaths. If only we could accept that we and the people we love most will die, then we could be free from fear and embrace living in the present moment. We would be alive to the present moment because that is all we have.

Impermanence afflicts us. We try to cling to the permanent, but we cannot actually grasp it, because nothing is permanent except impermanence. The challenge is to become freed by this insight, rather than grasp at the mirage of permanence.

Food is one of the ways we grasp. We look to food to find that guarantee or confirmation of permanence (“I have always eaten it this way!”). Like nonspiritually oriented individuals, spiritual practitioners may *cling to the past*. They grasp onto the past through meat eating. As Krishnamurti observes, we are “afraid of the known coming to an end.” When a best-selling spiritual author was asked if he was vegetarian, he responded that he had had a vegetarian meal once and that they were going to have to be tastier if he was to become a vegetarian. Clearly, he felt defensive. But his defensiveness revealed what he was clinging to: he was attached to the tastes of his past. The freedom he experiences in other aspects of his life has not been discovered here. In clinging to his diet, he creates the illusion of permanence.

Some people may fear becoming vegetarians because they are clinging to permanence. They hold on to old habits as though that will make life more permanent. Here we discover a relationship between our fear of our own death and our willingness to require the deaths of so many billions of animals each year. This resistance to dealing with our own mortality may be that which allows us to take the deaths of animals so lightly. We deaden ourselves to death. We deny our fear, and thus deny feeling.

Achieving Integration

Integration is related to integrity. Integrity is a quality or commitment an individual can bring to her or his life. It is an awareness about how to live with commitment and honesty, honoring one's own best impulses.

Integration is the complete application of energy.

Integration, then, is a key component of spiritual practice. Practice helps us integrate awareness with action. When I started meditating, it was as if I took a wedge and propped a door open, slightly. Slowly the wedge and the door became a part of the open space. The meaning of meditation became how meditation informs my day. I brought awareness of my emotions and my fluid self into my outer life. In the same way, vegetarianism is not only about eating, but how vegetarianism informs my day.

By sitting or by coming to the yoga mat or by writing or by vegetarian cooking, we allow the process to touch us. We may not feel that the practice is having any effect, but we should rest assured that it is at work beneath the level of consciousness. It is registering inside of us and it will manifest itself. That is why we trust the process. We understand we are being touched.

Something positive exists and we can access it for ourselves. We are the something positive that exists and we can unfold it, be its reflection and manifestation. In this way, we experience that the positive is not the outcome but the process.





The problem of our mind, relating conscious to preconscious awareness, takes us deep into everyday living. Dare we open our doors to the source of our being? What are flesh and bones for?

—Paul Reps

