

Why Veganism?

by Eva Batt (1908 – 1989)

Written for *Here's Harmlessness: An Anthology of Ahimsa*, first published in 1964 by the American Vegan Society. This essay offers a fascinating glimpse into the history of the vegan movement. Eva Batt, residing in England, became a vegan in 1954, just ten years after the term was coined. In the decades that followed, Batt made major contributions to the spread of veganism, including two cookbooks, and played several roles within the UK Vegan Society, including fifteen years as chairperson.

Although all through the ages there have been many people living a strictly vegetarian existence for one reason or another, it was not until 1944 that a few enthusiastic total vegetarians (later to call themselves vegans) met in London to exchange knowledge gained through personal experience of living on a diet which excluded not only flesh, but all dairy products (milk, butter, cheese, yogurt, and eggs) as well, and to discuss ways and means of making the results available to all, so that anyone who wished could adopt this humane diet with confidence.

The first Vegan Society was founded in February of that year in England and a newsletter was circulated to members. This was replaced in the summer of 1946 by the quarterly magazine, *The Vegan*, which is still published. More and more humanitarians joined, with varying degrees of knowledge and experience. Occasionally, enthusiasm was greater than either, and during the next few years some of these pioneers developed symptoms of diet deficiencies and a few suffered much both physically and socially.

But it is as a direct result of these selfless pioneers that today vegans can embark on this wonderful adventure in compassionate living without fear, and are accepted as (almost) "normal" citizens. Since that time, vegans from many other lands have joined with those in the British Isles, and in 1960 the American Vegan Society was formed in Malaga, New Jersey, publishing *Ahimsa* magazine. As might be expected, close coöperation exists between the two societies.

Veganism has always stressed the need for sound nutrition as well as humane diet, the importance of soil conservation and the correct long-term use of the land so that our heirs should not find this precious heritage eroded, scorched, or leached of the essential minerals so necessary for a full and healthy life. Of course, vegans rely upon natural methods (pure food, fresh air, sunshine, exercise, etc.) rather than using vaccines and serums to retain a sound, healthy body and mind. Also, the contamination of water with sewage, industrial wastes, or the addition of fluorides, etc., is not, in the vegan view, in the best interests of the individual or the community.

The use of pesticides and of artificial fertilizers is opposed to vegan principles, and veganic gardening has proven them to be unnecessary once the correct balance of the soil has been established. Fruits and vegetables grown with the veganic methods can be as large and beautiful, and perfectly formed, as those grown under any other methods. (Note: This is not the same as “organic”, which may mean utilizing dried blood, bone meal, hood and horn meal, plus any other slaughterhouse waste products.)

Indeed, the slides illustrating Mr. O’Brien’s lecture at the Royal Society Of Arts in London proved that food produced by the Dalziel O’Brien veganic no-digging method can be large and beautiful, as well as more nutritious and flavorsome than that grown with “artificials” and smothered in poisonous insecticides. To vegans it has the added advantage of being humanely produced, owing nothing to the aforementioned slaughter products.

Because of their belief in Ahimsa (Sanskrit: Non-Killing, Non-Injuring, Harmlessness), vegans are naturally inclined toward pacifism, and many take an active part in opposing all kinds of aggressive activity, but veganism has no connection with any political party or system, national or international. Similarly, individual vegans may be deeply religious, perhaps devout Christians or disciples of one of many other faiths and creeds in this world, but this is not a requisite of veganism, which is an everyday, fundamental way of life concerned with living without hurting others. The hereafter may, or may not, solve all our problems; but what we do now certainly affects all those around us.

There are several roads to veganism and many individual views of it, but veganism is one thing and one thing only—a way of living which avoids exploitation whether it be of our fellow men, the animal population, or the soil upon which we all rely for our very existence. A few are attracted to veganism at first because they desire to improve or regain their health; others are more interested in the economic aspect which is of great important to everyone. Few non-vegetarians appreciate the fact that because much more vegan food (vegetables, fruit, grain, nuts, seeds) can be produced on an equal area of land in a given time, veganism if generally adopted would not only release man from animal husbandry and all its cruelty, but many fertile acres would be freed for the abundant production of food for direct human consumption. In such circumstances, even Britain could become a food *exporting* nation.

Think what this could mean to the “underdeveloped” (another term for starving) peoples of this world and what a contribution it would make towards world peace!

But by far the greatest number of vegans are those who have been moved by compassion to adopt this way of living without hurting. Most have been reared on the usual mixed diet with meat, eggs, milk, and fish possibly predominating, but may have been feeling for some time that this could not possibly be the best way to live. Then, perhaps a casual visit to a cattle market, or the sight of new-born

calves being driven to slaughter (born and killed so that humans may drink the milk that Nature provided for calves) has caused their decision to be a party to such criminal practices no longer.

Sometimes a person is sincerely anxious to help in this resistance to cruel exploitation yet hesitates for fear of seeming “peculiar” to his friends, or even looking a bit “odd” without woolen cardigan or leather shoes. Thanks, however, to the pioneers, and to the efficient alternatives created by our present economic position, such fears can now be immediately dispelled. Another deterrent to a few, is the reluctance to refuse animal food when accepting hospitality. This discomfort is quite unnecessary; surely if any should be embarrassed it must be those who have not taken the trouble to provide good, humanely produced food for their guests and actually expect them to eat dead animals, or margarine made from the body of a whale which has been killed by shooting explosives into its insides. Our friends do not realize these things, so it is up to us to make the facts generally known.

Of course there are difficulties for the beginner, but these exist more in imagination than in fact, and tend to disappear quickly when the decision is made to go ahead anyway. It is not that veganism is so difficult—it is simplicity itself—but while society (and most of the world) is geared to animal exploitation, and world economics are built upon the generally accepted principle that might is right and the dumb have no rights, anything which tends to interfere with or bypass this is *not* encouraged. Also, veganism offers nothing for big business to exploit. Many people ask why we need to “go so far” and say that lacto-vegetarianism [still using dairy products, perhaps leather, etc.] is enough for the time being. Unfortunately, very few vegetarians indeed, in our experience, really appreciate the present rate of exploitation, not from lack of feeling but rather from lack of interest and understanding. Unlike vegans, a great many vegetarians are concerned chiefly with their health and are prepared for animals to be killed to produce leather, cheese, margarine, etc., so long as they do not actually eat the carcass.

In our opinion, it matters not one jot to the innocent creature whether it is to be slaughtered for human food, medicine, clothing, sport, or such luxuries as ivory ornaments, horn, bone or tortoiseshell knick-knacks, crocodile handbags, or exotic perfume. Sudden death in the prime of life, or the lingering agony of pain and starvation in a steel trap, must be as terrifying for the field-mouse, stoat or rabbit as for the hunted tiger, whale or stag. What at first may appear to be a quick death for one creature often means a slow starvation for her young ones as well. Sometimes it is the baby, or rather its skin, which is coveted by man. What the parent seal feels as she grieves over the bloody remains of her clubbed and quickly skinned pup, is probably no different from the anguish of the domestic cow on losing her newly-born calf. Anyone living near a farm or slaughterhouse has learned the pitiful cries of both mother and calf.

But the majority of persons, on first adopting a lacto-vegetarian diet, increase their consumption of dairy products and eggs which means that any relief of suffering for the animals exists more in hope than in fact. It is surprising to learn how many vegetarians are unaware that the rennet used to *curdle* many cheeses is obtained from the stomach of a freshly-killed, very young calf. Such cheeses are not, of course, even lacto-vegetarian; and we feel that these inconsistencies should be much more widely publicized.

If, however, we were to compare degrees of cruelty, it would be clearly seen that of all the “food animals” the cow suffers far more than beef cattle. For the whole of her life, this soft-eyed, docile animal is regarded simply as a milk machine. She is kept going with drugs and “steamed up” with hormones, injected with antibiotics, and still has to suffer the horrors of the slaughterhouse when she has at last become unprofitable.

Putting veganism into practice will require a little patience, some knowledge of nutrition (which is easily learned and is a most rewarding study) and perhaps a bit of help from other vegans who have acquired local knowledge about the availability in the area of pure foods, humane clothing and household products. Call on your Society for help and advice if your particular problem has not yet been dealt with in the magazine.

All made-up foods, i.e., biscuits, cakes, “ready-mixes”, pies, puddings, tinned soups, etc., are suspect. They are likely to contain at least one of the following: butter, milk (fresh or dried), honey, cheese, animal fats (including whale or seal oil which for some reason is not always included under this heading by food processors!), or eggs. [Additional ingredients as fractions from milk or from fat—usually animal—include whey and various *lactates*; numerous *stearates* and other fatty derivatives, etc.]

Apart from this, they are nutritionally inferior to the simpler fresh foods—fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds, grains—partly because they have been cooked or otherwise processed and partly because they are also likely to contain some of the 800 recognized (but not recommended) food additives in the way of chemical dyes, improvers, softeners, preservatives, synthetic flavorings, bleaches, etc., etc., etc. A good working guide for a beginner is: “If you can’t eat it raw, leave it alone!” There are several obvious reasons why it may not be advisable for anyone on an “orthodox” diet to change overnight to all raw foods, but eating a fair proportion of these is a must for general fitness, as all forms of cooking destroy some of the nutrients in foods.

An occasional serving of good home-made soup, conservatively cooked vegetables, wholemeal bread, or potatoes baked and eaten with the jackets, will add variety and interest to the essential green salads, fresh fruit, nuts and grains (these last may be sprouted with ease and excellent results) which form the basis for a good vegan diet.

Catering for non-vegan guests will be a poser at first, but a little shopping around and experimenting will prove that savory rissoles, nut roasts, cakes, biscuits, tarts and pies in great variety can be produced from all-vegetable ingredients for friends who expect this type of food. This is another challenge and it gives us an excellent opportunity to demonstrate how attractive, flavorful and varied a meal can be made with absolutely no animal content.

Being entertained calls for a little tact and quite a lot of determination. It also necessitates explaining beforehand (as simply as possible) our eating requirements, if our hostess is not to feel embarrassed by our failure to appreciate the *delicacies* she will otherwise offer. However, everyone can produce some fruit and nuts without any difficulty and with the minimum of preparation, so we need not feel that we are being a nuisance. Nevertheless, on the first such occasion the hostess is bound to feel that you are “not getting enough to eat”. But your reassurance on this point can, if handled with diplomacy, add to her education. We find it best to answer all questions fairly briefly and leave it at that. This invariably creates more interest and further questions, which enable us to sow a few seeds without listeners feeling they are being “preached to”.

But veganism is by no means concerned only with food; vegans deplore the slaughter or exploitation of any creature for any reason:

- FOOD—Meat, fish, poultry, eggs, milk, butter, cheese, cream, lard, honey, and all made-up foods containing any of these;
- CLOTHING—Wool, leather, silk, reptile skins, etc.;
- ADORNMENT—Fur, feathers, pearls, ivory, etc.;
- TOILETRIES—Soaps, cosmetics and creams containing animal fats and oils, lanolin [wool fat] and perfume ingredients obtained from animals under grossly cruel conditions;
- HOUSEHOLD GOODS—Hair and wool rugs and carpets, woolen blankets, feather pillows, brushes and brooms made of hair; oils, greases, polishes, etc., that include animal fats in the ingredients;
- SPORTS—Hunting, racing, shooting, fishing, etc.;
- AMUSEMENTS—Circuses and all acts which include performing animals or birds; zoos wherein naturally free creatures are imprisoned—national parks and wildlife preserves are so much better and more rewarding for all concerned;
- MEDICINES—Vaccines, serums, etc., made from animals, not forgetting that millions of animals are used yearly for “testing” all kinds of drugs as well as shampoos and “beauty products”.

This may seem a formidable list but it only goes to show to what great extent we have grown to rely on animal-based substances and the wholesale exploitation of every poor creature from whom man can extract a profit. However, for all the above there are humane alternatives. Even the fine artist-brushes are now being produced of synthetic materials.

The Vegan lists foods and other items guaranteed by the makers to be quite free of any ingredient of animal origin, and these lists are revised frequently.

Aside from immediate effects, vegans consider this way of life to be no less than a duty to future generations. It will take many ages at the present rate of progress to undo all the results of past wrongs, if indeed this is ever possible; but whatever our actions, it is our heirs even more than we who will reap the results (good or bad) of what we do today, tomorrow, and the next day, until we leave them—what? A desert, a conflagration, or a garden of plenty?

The decision is yours and mine.

Memoir of Eva Batt by The Vegan Society²

In 1954, Eva had a shattering first-hand experience of the practice of separating cow and calf which is central to commercial milk production, and as a result became vegan and joined The Vegan Society.

In 1958 she was elected to the Vegan Society committee and served on that until 1961 and again from 1966 until retiring in 1982; from 1967 to 1982 she was Chairman. The five-year gap was filled by a stint as Hon Secretary. She also served on the editorial board of *The Vegan* for part of this time. In 1965, she organised the Dinner to mark the 21st Birthday of The Vegan Society.

For more than twenty years, Eva, writing under the pen-name 'Evita', edited the commodity news pages of *The Vegan*, tracking and promoting the ever-increasing range of vegan food and non-food products. She also gave many talks on veganism, also newspaper, radio and TV interviews, including a leading part in the 1976 BBC2 Open Door programme which did so much to bring veganism into mainstream awareness.

Perhaps Eva's greatest contribution to the growth of veganism was her two highly popular cookbooks, *What's Cooking?* (1973) and *What Else Is Cooking?* (1983), both of which were still in print in 2008 although under different titles. She also wrote a slim volume of vegan-themed poetry, *In Lighter Vein* (1974).

A woman with seemingly boundless energy, Eva was also actively involved in 'Beauty Without Cruelty' and was a Director of the Plamil company which produced the first British soya milk. And for many years, she ran her own boutique in her hometown of Enfield, selling a wide range of vegan foods, clothing and footwear. For something like twenty years, under various titles, Eva Batt was one of the main public faces of veganism, if not the public face.

[2] www.vegansociety.com/about_us/hall_of_fame/#EB