

# Why vegetarian?

MANY non-vegetarians, especially in the Western world are quick to identify vegetarianism with some kind of spiritual or religious belief – as something traditionally oriental or even new age, like the practice of yoga!

This is, of course, perfectly understandable, given that a majority of the world's non-meat-eaters share a connection with Eastern philosophy and thinking, particularly in countries like India where the predominant Hindu population has traditionally followed a vegetarian diet.

However, there is an increasing number of vegetarians all over the world (including the West), who choose to forego the consumption of meat for more practical reasons, grounded in reality.

In China, vegetarianism has been around in a lesser form since at least the 7th Century and has been practised by devout Buddhists. In recent years, it has seen a new resurgence in the cities as the emerging middle class in China pay attention to issues of health and diet. In 2010, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao proposed a nationwide campaign of 'one day of vegetarian every week,' mainly as part of a broader environmental platform.

## 'Veggie Pride'

In Belgium, the city of Ghent was the first in the world in 2009 to go vegetarian at least once a week as a means to recognise the impact of livestock on the environment. France started the world's first 'Veggie Pride' in 2001 in Paris, an international event that celebrates and promotes vegetarianism and veganism. Other cities in the world have since emulated and the first Italian 'Veggie Pride' was held in Rome in 2008 and in Birmingham, Lyon, Milan and Prague simultaneously in 2009.

As you can see, vegetarianism is no longer an Eastern fad but an international movement that finds resonance in different cultures and geographies.

I have been vegetarian all my life – although, during my childhood, it was something I accepted without question as part of a fam-

## Guest Column

By Vijay Eswaran

### More than just a personal belief

But today, vegetarianism is more than just a personal belief. It is part of the corporate philosophy of the company I founded with my partner, who is also vegetarian. The QI Group that employs more than 1,000 people in nearly 30 different countries is a fully vegetarian company. The primary consideration here for us is respect for the environment and the belief that all life is sacred.

Gandhi, the corporate icon of the QI Group propagated the concept of ahimsa, a Sanskrit term which means non-violence. This translated into the practice of vegetarianism which he lived by, and propagated vehemently. All our corporate events such as luncheons, press conferences or even conventions attended by thousands from around the world, cater a strictly vegetarian menu.

It is a philosophy that we actively propagate internally to our employees, though by no means is anyone forced to convert to vegetarianism. However, the company has embraced this concept since its inception and has continued to take a firm stance on it.

### Going green

A key issue we have been focusing on in recent times is ways and means of going green. An important aspect of this is based on the concept of environmental vegetarianism, which is the practice of vegetarianism based on the indications that animal production, particularly by intensive agriculture is environmentally unsustainable. The primary environmental con-

### FT Quote

Ultimately, the message is simple – Being vegetarian is not simply the healthier or more ethical choice. It is the only one for those of us who abhor violence and have respect for all life



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tion, land degradation, loss of topsoil, climate change, the overuse of resources including oil and water and loss of biodiversity."

Part of our efforts in the different areas of business we are involved in are to ensure minimal damage to the environment and maximising natural resources wherever possible. We recently acquired a 15-storey building in the heart of Petaling Jaya city in Malaysia to house the QI Group's operational headquarters, which has been renovated using only green and environmental friendly material. We will soon be setting up a cafeteria there that will provide an all-vegetarian menu. We have also developed an eco-friendly boutique resort in Koh Samui, Thailand that is run on green principles and has the island's only all-vegetarian restaurant, which is fast becoming a popular tourist stop.

Another flagship development is underway in peninsular Malaysia for an eco-tourism luxury resort and marina on the banks of the Rompin River that flows from the 200 million year old Rompin Forest Reserve. The main product portfolio of our direct selling company focuses on wellness products and services that enhance health and nutrition.

### Better health and nutrition

At a secondary level, vegetarianism is

while improving public health; declining livestock herds will take pressure off rangelands and grain lands, allowing the agricultural resource base to rejuvenate. As populations grow, lowering meat consumption worldwide will allow more efficient use of declining per capita land and water resources, while at the same time making grain more affordable to the world's chronically hungry."

### Spiritual consideration

The last consideration perhaps is spiritual. Hindu scriptures speak clearly and forcefully on vegetarianism. The ancient Yajur Veda summarily dictates: "Do not injure the beings living on the earth, in the air and in the water." The beautiful Tirukural from Tamil literature, a widely-read 2,000-year-old masterpiece of ethics, speaks of conscience: "When a man realises that meat is the butchered flesh of another creature, he must abstain from eating it."

In Jainism, the practice of vegetarianism is seen as an instrument for the practice of nonviolence and peaceful, cooperative coexistence. In Christianity, the Bible says, thou shall not kill. According to Buddhist teachings, the eater of meat and the animal eaten are locked together in a vicious cycle of mutual resentment, leading to rebirth and



life – although, during my childhood, it was something I accepted without question as part of a family tradition, without really understanding the concept in its entirety. As a young boy, I remember asking my mother why we didn't eat meat.

And she explained to me that animals are living beings just like us and just like I feel pain when I cut my finger or get hurt, the animal feels pain when it is cut and killed for its flesh. That instilled in me a deep abhorrence towards violence.

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ticularly by intensive agriculture is environmentally unsustainable. The primary environmental concerns with animal products are pollution and the use of resources such as fossil fuels, water and land.

A 2006 United Nations report titled 'Livestock's Long Shadow' concludes: "The livestock industry is one of the largest contributors to environmental degradation worldwide and modern practices of raising animals for food contributes on a massive scale to deforestation, air and water pollu-

## Better health and nutrition

At a secondary level, vegetarianism is also based on issues of better health and nutrition. The Worldwatch Institute, a globally focused environmental research organisation that was named as one of the top ten sustainable development research organisations, studied the global meat industry in 2005.

In its report it states: "Massive reductions in meat consumption in industrial nations will ease the health care burden

ings, the eater of meat and the animal eaten are locked together in a vicious cycle of mutual resentment, leading to rebirth and suffering. Ultimately, the message is simple – Being vegetarian is not simply the healthier or more ethical choice. It is the only one for those of us who abhor violence and have respect for all life.

**(The writer is a leading Asian businessman, best-selling author and speaker. He is also a major investor in the Colombo Stock Exchange.)**