

Conscious Carnivores

BY MIKE STOKES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROSS JOHNSON



rossjohnsonphoto.com

Yogic tradition generally dictates that in order to be a yogi, you must also be a vegetarian. But I believe that it is possible for there to be harmony between the practice of eating meat consciously and mindfully, and living a yogic life. Since eating meat involves directly or indirectly killing an animal or a fish, how do we eat meat and simultaneously promote love and unity (yoga)? And how do we eat meat in a way that honors the first tenet of Patanjali's yoga sutras, *ahimsa*? Ahimsa can be translated as non-harming or non-killing. Do we simply stop killing all forms of life? It is a difficult question for which there are many perspectives and points of view.

All animals must feed on other plant or animal matter to live. Therefore, some form of life must die in order for us, the human animal, to live. Killing, then, is part of the raw truth of life. We need the plant or animal flesh of another being to survive. One may choose to be a fruititarian, who only eats food that naturally falls from the plant, thereby not contributing to the harm of any life.

But even that path does not completely avoid causing harm or death to other beings. Every time we break a blade of grass we have harmed or killed another life-form. The challenge of living a yogic life is not to completely abstain from the act of killing, but instead to honestly and courageously embrace the reality of our part in it, and participate in it in the most harmonious and loving way possible. It is unrealistic to believe that we can be a human and never harm another being.

By connecting ourselves consciously and lovingly to the life and death of the animals we eat, we can honor the animal's sacrifice and at the same time honor the traditions and teachings of yoga. The act of taking an animal's life for the sake of nourishing our

bodies can be a conscious and sacred act. An experience from my own life illustrated this for me.

A few years back, I participated in a month-long indigenous wilderness survival course. One day, the leader of the program gathered all of the participants in a dirt clearing in the forest and brought out an elderly looking sheep. He said, "now you are all going to get the opportunity to participate in the sacred killing of an animal to feed the community. This is May. She is going to give her life so that her flesh and spirit may nourish you. Those of you who do not want to participate can wait back at the camp." I stayed. I had felt like a hypocrite for a long time, since I was a yogi but also a meat eater. I had tried vegetarianism many times, yet for a variety of reasons, it hadn't worked for me.

The leader walked May to the middle of the pine needle covered clearing. He instructed us to pray for her spirit, to ask her spirit for permission to take her life and to give thanks for her generous sacrifice. I closed my eyes and prayed quietly to myself. I asked the spirit of May to allow us to be nourished by her flesh. I thanked her for making the ultimate sacrifice for us and I asked for her spirit to be well cared for. I was scared and sad, but strangely at ease. I put my hands on her head. I gently petted and comforted her. Then this feeling arose in me. Deep inside, I felt as if she knew what was going on and had made peace with it. In that moment, I felt connected to her life and impending death and just as her fear seemed to be gone, so was mine. Then it was over.

In that moment I experienced for the first time in my life what it means to truly honor and connect to the life of the animal I was to consume. It illustrated to me the way that the mechanized killing of animals

in mass slaughterhouses is so out of balance with the health of our souls and our planet. In that moment, I felt deeply united with May, with all animals, and with all life. I was sad and grateful. I was profoundly at peace with the beautiful but brutal reality of life and death.

There are steps that we can take in our every day lives to ensure that our consumption of animals occurs in a mindful, honorable way. One is to honor and bless the animal that gave its life. Before eating, take a moment to contemplate the animal, its life, its death, its unique gifts and powers. Ask its spirit for permission to be nourished by it. Give thanks for its generous sacrifice. And ask that its spirit be well cared for in life and in death. It is important to know that organic, free-range and natural meat products are the best to use. The people participating in these industries are more likely to respect and honor the animal in life as well as in death. As consumers, every time we buy from them, we increase the number of animals in their care, thus increasing the number of animals that receive respect and honor. There are also certain types of fish that are sustainably harvested, promoting healthy ecosystems. Information about sustainable fish products can be found at blueoceaninstitute.org.

To be a conscious carnivore is to identify with the life of the animal; to love it with all your heart; to fully embrace your participation in its death; to connect with a bottomless gratitude for the ultimate and generous sacrifice it has made, and then to let the spirit and flesh of that being enter and literally become one or yoke (yoga) with you.

mike@freedomyoga.com