

A Dharma Voice for Animals - Thanissara, Dec 7th, 2019.

My dear friend Andrew Harvey, talking about the multi-dimensional planetary crisis we are in, said “If there is one thing wakes you at night and breaks your heart, then get up the next day and do something about it.”

It's many things of course; the wild fires sweeping across the globe, the collapse of our oceans, the devastating loss of wildlife and their habitat, the impact of extreme weather events on nearly all communities, and droughts that are destabilizing whole countries leading to mass migrations and wars; every piece of our dismembering world is a heartbreak.

However, if I was to focus on the one profound heartbreak, it has to be the way we treat animals, in particular the billions of animals caught in the truly hellish torture of agro-factory farms and their dystopian, heartless, mechanistic, violent practices. This is very challenging to talk about, because we have such a habit of orientating all experience, all dialogue, around the primacy of our human centric perspective, to the extent that we often don't see the harm we cause other beings.

When it comes to the five great precepts, which essentially offer a training to do no harm self or other, the invitation in that training is to understand we live in a web of life and in a realm of cause and effect. The Buddha taught that the observance of the precepts offer, “*immeasurable beings freedom from fear, hostility oppression.*” In the same way, to those observing the precepts, the Buddha said we too, in time, will “*experience immeasurable freedom from fear, hostility and oppression.*”

There are many lenses through which to regard our relationship with the animal kingdom, including reasons why we need to shift out of dependence on dairy and meat, for example, for health and for the planet. While all good and true, my own journey to a plant-based diet is in response to the terror, extreme pain, and torture of those innocents caught in the machinery of factory farms. Not just in factory farms, but all animals, fish and creatures subjugated to our human dominance, losing their right to life, control of their bodies, their sexual processes, their family, and their freedom.

I'm sharing here my own reflections, how I think about this issue. I don't intend to be "preachy" but to share my process into a deeper awakening beyond vegetarianism into giving up eggs, milk, and dairy products, which I found challenging.

For a long time, I was just unaware of the truth of dairy farming. It is really due to the activists, who go underground to film what actually goes on in the dairy industry that I was able to begin to make the shift. I have the deepest respect for these activists and their extraordinary bravery.

Even so, sometimes I would find myself reaching out in the super market, for "organic" cheeses and "organic" milk for my English cup of tea, to which I was addicted. So, I can't honestly say that I just saw one undercover expose and that shifted me irrevocably. I feel some shame to even write this, how it took a longer time for me to renounce a product rooted in such extreme violence.

I had excuses. It's hard getting vegan food traveling and working in Southern Africa, where I've worked for many decades. Or, it's "organic" Or, we need to have probiotics in yoghurt. Or whatever. There was really no good excuse.

Sometimes, I would walk up and down a supermarket aisle, struggling with myself, that pizza looked so good. My brain would disconnect, and my ethics would be muted, and I'd reach into the freezer and pull it out. As a meditator, I could feel the dissonance, but somehow, I still went through the check out.

So, I understand this involves an awakening journey. It's not usually a clear-cut decision, but on the whole, is a process of steps along the way. One day though, the final shift came unexpectedly, like when I was 14 years old after I read my first book about yoga book and vegetarianism. From that day I became a vegetarian. Eventually, there was also a final day when the thread, keeping me attached to milk meant for a calf, finally severed.

It was in deep meditation process. I experienced an intelligence much more profound than myself. I felt it as Mother Nature. She made me aware of a sobering reality. This may not be the reality for you, but it is for me.

It was a vision type transmission, a revelation of sorts. I understood that at a certain point of awakening, the implication being the point I was at, one is absolutely answerable for ones actions, decisions, and intentions. That is true all along of course, but before, there seemed to be some kind of buffer zone, a sort of deeper benevolent allowance of some kind; a kind of "benefit of the doubt," that gave some slack for growing into a more awakened state.

It was clear that slack, a sort of gift of grace, was finished. I "saw" or felt all the animals whose lives I was implicated in taking. This wasn't an ordinary state of consciousness, just a deep awareness and understanding. Further, I understood from then on, if any animal suffered, or had their life taken due

to my actions, I would be karmically implicated and answerable to them. From that moment on, I gave up all dairy products and my beloved black and Darjeeling teas, became vegan and deepened a resolve to do what I could to help those beings, who are as my own family on some level, caught in a terrible predicament.

These days, we are in a much bigger picture, one where all harmful causes are ripening at lightening speed into a karmic maelstrom. We now absolutely know, that the assumption of our right to dominate nature and her myriad beings, is a root cause for the collapse of our living systems, and is heralding our possible extinction.

Master Hua, from whom I learnt the Kuan Yin Dharmas, said if you want to know why there are wars, listen to the sounds at the slaughterhouse; the sounds, smells, the agony of it all. He talked of the great dark cloud of karma from the killing of animals that is oppressing the planet. It's all connected.

That's our awakening reality. That we are all deeply connected, that the period of grace, where we could be unconscious for a little bit longer, has ended. Perhaps then, the message to me is now the message to all of us. The consequences of our actions are catapulting back to us at lightening speed. So we have to pay attention.

To meet this reality is now our task. Every decision and action has consequences. In the midst of such urgency, the teaching "*we are here to awaken from the illusion of separation*" must now be our daily contemplation. A contemplation, rooted in fierce compassion and expressed as dedicated action founded in harmlessness and in service of Mother Nature and her many children, whatever form they appear in.