



predator & prey

can a meat-eating person practise non-violence?
eileen delehanty pearkes looks at *ahimsa*, in the 8th of
a 10-part series exploring the *yamas* & *niyamas*.

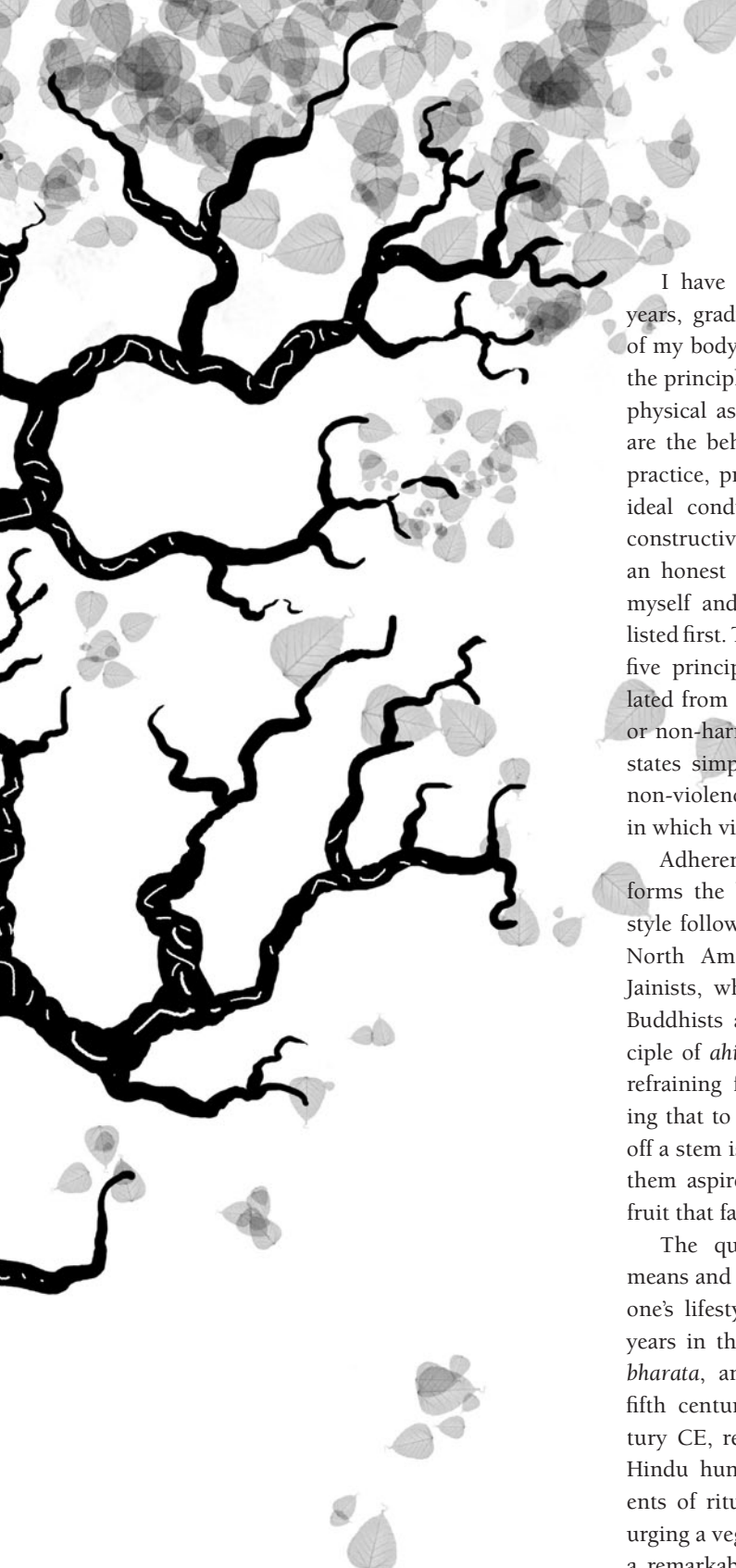
illustration by dushan milic.

“Not at this moment,
but soon enough, we are
lambs and we are leaves,
and we are stars, and
the shining, mysterious
pond water itself.”

— Mary Oliver

One day last winter, as I was returning from a walk to the grocery store with my dog, she disappeared around the corner into a lane. I called to her, but in uncharacteristic fashion, she did not reappear for some time. Finally, she careened around the corner out of the lane, a hunk of bloody bone dangling from her mouth. She peeled joyfully past me and made her way up the hill toward our house, strutting her prize before the other dogs that live around us. A few days later, after more bits of flesh and bone had stained the snow on the street and caused all manner of competitive canine jostling and enthusiastic chewing, the source of the meat was finally identified: a hunter living down the hill had butchered a deer in his back garage and left the remains in open containers.





I have practised yoga for over ten years, gradually becoming more aware of my body, mind and spirit, but also of the principles of living that underlie the physical asanas. The *yama* and *niyama* are the behavioural foundations of the practice, presenting me with a form of ideal conduct, pointing me toward a constructive human path as I cultivate an honest relationship with the world, myself and the Divine. The *yama* are listed first. The first and foremost of these five principles is *ahimsa*, widely translated from the Sanskrit as non-violence, or non-harming. Sutra 2.35 of Patanjali states simply that those who abide in non-violence will create an atmosphere in which violent behaviour ceases.

Adherence to the principle of *ahimsa* forms the basis for the vegetarian lifestyle followed by Hindus, and by many North Americans who practise yoga. Jainists, whose faith relates to that of Buddhists and Hindus, apply the principle of *ahimsa* even more strictly than refraining from killing animals, believing that to harvest a carrot or rip a leaf off a stem is also a harmful act. Many of them aspire to eat only nuts, seeds or fruit that fall from a tree.

The question about what *ahimsa* means and how rigorously to apply it to one's lifestyle dates back thousands of years in the Hindu culture. The *Mahabharata*, an epic written between the fifth century BCE and the fourth century CE, records dialogue between the Hindu hunters who were also proponents of ritual sacrifice and the Hindus urging a vegetarian diet. This debate has a remarkably contemporary ring. Dharma sutra law books from the fifth century BCE contain regulations for meat eating and offer lists of animals that can be eaten.

Ayurveda, a form of medicine that

emphasizes harmony and longevity and is practised by many millions of people in India, recommends meat consumption for health reasons, without mentioning ethics. And to complicate matters even further, Hindu scriptures speak of brave warriors who wage battles and then go to heaven. On the surface, such harming of other human beings in battle appears to be a blatant denial of *ahimsa*, as does my consumption of chicken broth, or elk sausage from an animal hunted by a friend.

In *Light on Ashtanga Yoga*, B.K.S. Iyengar suggests that arriving at a deeper understanding of the *yama* and *niyama* requires peeling the fruit of each behavioural principle, to reach the nectar of its meaning. According to Iyengar, "one has to go on peeling layer after layer of the mixed feelings in one's action." This seems particularly necessary when contemplating the complexities of *ahimsa*. Is *ahimsa* an unbending dietary rule of conduct, or is it the essential underpinning of political and religious pacifism that inspired Gandhi's great work? Can a meat-eating human being practise non-violence? How might the practice of *ahimsa* support life in a sustainable world?

Observing my dog with the deer bone that day was a graphic reminder that within natural systems, everything eats something; the predator-prey relationship is part of this world I inhabit. Natural systems achieve balance and sustainability through the process of creatures killing each other for food, in a species hierarchy that has evolved over thousands of years. What is my own particular place in this hierarchy? I do not know. Last winter, I watched my domesticated animal friend take her place. She knew instantly what to do with that

bloody bone and she relished the opportunity. A part of me envied how simple it was for her.

I was raised in a meat-eating household. My grandfather was a cattle rancher and a fine hunter of deer, pheasant and wild turkey. Growing up, I heard many stories of his generosity in sharing meat from animals with other rural families who were hungry during the Great Depression. I learned in this way to associate the practice of hunting and consumption of meat not with violence, but with generosity and kindness.

In the past several years, my research and writing have exposed me to yet another perspective on animal consumption. In studying the history and landscape of the southeastern corner of British Columbia where I live, I have become acquainted with the Sinixt, or Arrow Lakes Indians, a peace-loving indigenous people who built a culture of benevolence around the abundant return of migrating salmon and caribou. At the annual fish harvest, various tribes reconnected from across considerable distance. The Sinixt helped to oversee the activities of the fishery. Each day, the salmon pulled from the Columbia River were shared evenly among all people, young and old. Preservation of this flesh for winter was a communal effort.

I have also read about a song the Sinixt Interior Salish hunters once sang to a bear after they killed it for food, the performance of which provoked elders to cry with a mixture of sadness and admiration for the animal's spirit. The act of killing a bear and consuming its meat does not feel violent to me in this context. Instead, I sense a deep connection between the hunter and the hunted, a mutual identification and association that feels like something whole and unharmed.

My research and writing over the years has led me to form friendships with some of the contemporary members of the Sinixt tribe. I treasure these relationships for the window into another world that they provide. My Sinixt friends have an unabashed, matter-of-fact relationship with eating animals. They see meat and fish as products of the natural world that deserve respect and admiration, but are still meant to be eaten. They have a spiritual connection with this form of food that I admire. I have helped one of them cook moose stew to share with a crowd, from meat given to her as a gift by a student. I have watched a group of women sit with a deer carcass under a tree, chatting lightheartedly, slicing the meat into thin steaks before preserving them in a smoker, working with every gesture of appreciation, gentleness and gratitude.

T. K. V. Desikachar writes in *The Heart of Yoga* that *ahimsa* is more than lack of violence. It also means acting with kindness, friendliness and consideration of other people or things. B.K.S. Iyengar suggests that the practice of non-violence needs a "careful intelligence," one that guides the replacement of negative and destructive thoughts with positive and constructive ones. For Iyengar, violence can occur within the mind. He lists anger, cruelty, ferocity, harassment and even teasing as forms of violence. In Iyengar's reflections I taste the flavour of inner fruit, a concept of *ahimsa* that lies beneath the overlying peel of politics, environmentalism and even ethics.

One day last summer, I was driving through the mountains and came across a dead deer, victim of a late night clash with an automobile. I used to drive past road kill, averting my eyes in horror. But over the years, my indigenous friends

have helped me to see that I am linked to these creatures: they are me, I am them; they deserve my compassion. I pulled over, stepped out into the midday heat and bent down to the deer. She had been lactating. Her belly was still swollen with milk. I stroked her briefly and turned back to scan the woods beside the road for a fawn, though I was sure the baby was nowhere nearby now, hours after the mother's death. I pulled her back away from the road's edge into the shade of a tree, covered her with spears of green bracken and told her how sorry I was.

It may take me many more years of practice both on and off the mat to come to a full understanding of *ahimsa*. I cannot claim any confidence about its meaning, or my ability to abide by the ideal as intended. After all my reading, I am still not sure what the intention of this *yama* was in the Hindu tradition, or is now in the world I inhabit. I can say with more certainty that the more I contemplate *ahimsa* and allow the practice and teachings of yoga to spread through my life, the fewer divisions exist between me and the place where I live: rock and carrot, flower and frog, deer and dog. I am this world, and it is me. For this connection, I remain deeply grateful. ॐ

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