

Episode 5: Vegans Killed Yoga

Tejal: Vegans Killed Yoga! That's our episode name.

Jesal: I'm not sure we chose wisely.

Tejal and Jesal: [laughs]

Jesal: I think we're going to get a lot of hate.

Tejal: Mmm, like more hate than our first episode title, White Women Killed Yoga?

Jesal: Uh...

Tejal: [laughs]

Jesal: I think like at least the equivalent, if not more.

Tejal: Okay...

Jesal: We'll see.

Tejal: Okay, let's prepare.

Tejal and Jesal: [deep breaths, some laughter]

Tejal: Hello everyone, I'm Tejal.

Jesal: And I'm Jesal.

Tejal: And this is Yoga is Dead.

Jesal: We're two Indian American yoga teachers navigating the weird and tricky world of yoga.

Tejal: Get ready to hear our personal stories, thoughts, and research on who killed yoga. Grab some chai, a tall, comfortable seat and let's go.

[intro music]

Tejal: Right now you probably think we hate vegans, and later into the episode we will talk more about veganism. But really this episode is about some of the really

toxic conversations we're having in the yoga industry around food and diet. And hopefully you're nodding your head yes [laughs]. And how sometimes we use and misuse the concept of non-harming to actually perpetuate a harmful diet and body image culture.

Jesal: Yeah, so you mentioned non-harming and what we're really referring to is the concept of Ahimsa.

Jesal: So let's explain: Ahimsa is usually translated as non violence. In Sanskrit, Himsa -- without the [letter] a -- means injury or harm, and then adding the [letter] a in front negates the meaning. So ahimsa is non-injury or non-harm. Ahimsa is a central tenet of a lot of religions and spiritual practices, including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and of course yoga.

Tejal: And ahimsa is one of the yamas: the internal practices observed by yoga students. And it's sometimes explained as aiming to cause no injury in thought, in word, or in deed, or in action. It's intended as a practice of mindfulness, a way of being that is full of kind awareness. But we're going to start by talking about some, or really, many folks practicing Ahimsa through diet and food, rather than through their intentions and thoughts.

Jesal: In yoga spaces, I've almost always heard Ahimsa conversations become conversations about food and diet.

Tejal: Someone actually told me in their teacher training they were taught the definition of Ahimsa, or the translation, was to mean vegan.

[pause]

Jesal: Ummm...

Tejal: That just blew my mind.

Jesal: Yeah, that's not correct.

Tejal: Inaccurate much.

Jesal: Inaccurate. And, you know, I think I know part of the reason why -- and this comes from me talking to senior teacher of mine. He's lived in New York for a very long time, and he told me that in the '80s and '90s, Jivamukti was one of the few places to go for yoga and get trained as a teacher. And their entire ethos is based in veganism. And in order to do their teacher training and be a

teacher you *had* to maintain a vegan diet. And the reasoning behind that was obviously the concept of Ahimsa. And apparently, those early students of the Jivamukti system went on to become lead teachers all over the country and actually even all over the world and open up their own studios. And then they passed this idea on that you had to be vegan in order to like teach and practice yoga.

Tejal: You know I wasn't really clued into this, this Ahimsa and veganism link from my asana practices, so I didn't have the same experience around food, diet, and potential harm while studying or practicing yoga. Which I have to say it now, after all the research and stories we've collected, I'm grateful for. But then, moving into my teaching career, I have had situations where I felt shamed for what I was eating. But that wasn't because of the health factor of my food, it was because of the ethnic factor. And I've shared about this in a companion interview to episode one that we had with Ryan Orrico on the Unusually Focused Podcast.

Tejal: So in the discussions we've had around Ahimsa and diet, I found it so striking that the focus is even on food. Right? From what I've always understood about practicing Ahimsa is that it's a practice where you focus on your thoughts as non harming. In doing that you end up changing what you output to others, and treat others in non harming, non-injurious ways. What makes it a truly challenging practice for me is making the change starting from the intention before it even becomes a fully formed thought. So having that seed of kindness before it even becomes a cognizant thought that you want to put into words or actions. And that whole practice of starting internally makes a lot of sense to me, because we have enough issues around self care as a society and as individuals, let alone caring for others.

Jesal: Yeah. That's like the heart of what we're going to get to in this discussion today. Because all this focus on food as a stepping off point for understanding Ahimsa has a lot of human consequences. And often it can be harmful to ourselves, it can be harmful to others, and it seems that we either choose to ignore or don't even recognize all of this harm is happening.

Jesal: A story I heard that really highlights this comes from a yoga teacher friend of mine I met earlier this year. My friend is a woman of color who told me that during the Ahimsa conversation in her teacher training, the lead teacher started talking about willful ignorance. That lead teacher was trying to keep the conversation to a discussion about food and animal welfare. But my friend felt so strongly that there needed to be some conversation around race and bias in

yoga studios, especially given the context of what's happening in the world today.

Jesal: Instead of holding space for that conversation, the lead teacher totally tone policed her and then allowed someone else, a white woman, to tell an unrelated story about being in her previous workplace and being mistreated by a person of color. And so basically, my friend felt like her experiences were shut down. She was tone policed, and that the welfare of animals was somehow made to be superior to the welfare of human beings in that conversation. So she came away from that conversation feeling really traumatized.

Tejal: So let's just sum that whole scenario up in several issues, because this story is not isolated. And in doing this work, we've received a lot of stories from other people in terms of silencing. So this story, let's just break it down. Where a person of color is silenced for their non status quo inquiry on the elevation of the importance of food and diet *over* prejudice and bias towards human beings. And then the lead teacher trainer, her argument is cloaked with this self serving definition of Ahimsa - that in turn ends up harming the POC, the people in the room.

Jesal: Yeah. And it actually ends up harming everyone as we're going to find out, but yes, that's exactly what happened. And like you said, these incidents aren't isolated. We know from personal experience that conversations brought up to discuss race or bias or prejudice get shut down pretty quickly by white yoga teachers in positions of power. It happens in part because of the ignorance and conditioned racism that white people are experiencing, but also because human rights and equality is really hard. And I think on the surface of things, it seems way easier to just talk about food and animal rights. And we're going to kind of debunk this because it's actually not as straightforward as it seems. But I think that that's what's coming across, is we're told that Ahimsa, food, and animal rights is straightforward, and then we don't have to really get into a complex conversation.

Tejal: Yeah, I totally agree. It's not as simple as one right answer and one wrong answer. And you and I know that there's a gray area that exist all around and especially with us. So how about you go into our food and diet habits now and maybe how they're different from how they used to be?

Jesal: Yeah, I think with food and yoga, what shifted for both of us a lot is becoming a yoga teacher has made us go from these nine to five jobs with a set schedule and set meal times to having erratic shifting schedules that force us to constantly think about, when am I going to eat? Am I going to have time to eat?

Where am I going to eat? Am I going to be able to sit down somewhere? And then am I going to make it to class and not want to puke from being full? Or am I going to have enough energy actually -- have I taken in enough today? So it's constantly the struggle.

Tejal: Yeah, the struggle is real. And, you know, we have a lot to figure out on that front, day by day, especially when you work with private clients, because those schedules can shift, so it's nothing we can really rely on if that's, you know, who your audience is or who your student community is. And at times, because of how infrequent we might eat during a single day, it can even feel like we're doing intermittent fasting but not by any strict guidelines or adhering to any rule book around it.

Jesal: Definitely not on purpose.

Tejal: Yeah, and not on purpose. Just by nature of the job.

Jesal: Yeah, I agree with that. I wonder, are you vegetarian or vegan or do you have any dietary restrictions?

Tejal: So, no, I'm not vegetarian. And no, I'm not vegan. I was raised vegetarian - ovo-lacto vegetarian, actually. So ghee and tea, baby.

Jesal: Ghee and tea, we need to put that on a t-shirt.

Tejal and Jesal: [laughs]

Tejal: But I can't say I remember being taught explicitly about staying a vegetarian, at least not that I can recall. And maybe it's because I choose not to remember it because I do something different than what I was taught.

Jesal: Selective memory.

Tejal: Yeah [laughs], it might be that. So here I am as a kid in my childhood trying to stay vegetarian, and then I realized my Bengali and Maithili school friends, and then my Marathi best friend, all ate meat, and a few of them were practicing Hindus. So that just kind of confused me even further, because they carried no guilt around eating meat and that's how they were raised. So that made me feel like I wasn't a fraud in practicing my faith differently than my folks. I also found it to be kind of a nuisance to be vegetarian outside of my house. And since I wasn't clear on why I needed to avoid meat, when I ate meat and enjoyed the taste, I just kept on eating it. So how about you J, are you vegetarian or vegan?

- Jesal: I'm vegetarian, I'm not vegan. I eat eggs and dairy, so lacto-ovo like you said. I know it's common for us Gujaratis to be raised vegetarian, and I definitely did try eating meat when I got older, but I honestly just don't like it and my body doesn't react well, like I get sick. So it's a like legitimate reaction. And I just think I was meant to be vegetarian, and I always joke about the bacon test, like if you smell bacon, and you like it, then you're probably meant to eat meat. And I smell bacon and I hate it, so I know I'm not meant to eat meat.
- Jesal: And the other difference is that my parents really stressed to me that to them it felt wrong to kill an animal for food. But I didn't really know anything about veganism when I grew up, because it was a Hindu household and we use ghee and milk and yogurt for everything.
- Tejal: Yeah. Hindus use ghee and milk for rituals and religious rites and ceremonies for the small lamps we burn and there is dairy in the sweetened foods we bless and offer during prayer.
- Jesal: And I also grew up dancing Bharatanatyam, so stories of Krishna eating butter straight out of the clay pots was what I was dancing to and being told.
- Tejal: Yeah, most of us all know the little baby Krishna getting caught with his hand in the ghee pot. It's so cute and mischievous. It's just like a childhood story we heard growing up. Then most recently I was vegetarian actually, I tried it out for two years in the early '10s. And there were other times that I would just stop eating meat for instance at a time. Then I started having dreams about eating meat and fish so I took that as a sign of intuitive body wisdom and started eating meat again. So for you, have never really consistently meat. Have you ever been vegan though? I think you said no.
- Jesal: No, I have tried it though. And I will say it's not for me. God bless vegans because it is challenging. It is a challenging lifestyle. And it does take a lot of discipline, but I just felt that when I cut out dairy and eggs, it just wasn't as healthy for my body personally. And I would be drinking like a lot more soy milk and I just felt like I was eating more processed foods and I just made the choice that for me, I wanted to do like more of the whole foods, even if they were "non vegan" or non healthy or whatever. So that's the choice that I made. And I do feel conflicted about it because I do know that factory farming is just really horrible. And of course, the meat and dairy industries are the biggest contributors to environmental pollution. I do try to be a conscious consumer and try to buy like locally from the farmer's market and things like that.

- Jesal: I'm also conflicted because it's hard enough to be a vegetarian without having to spend every second thinking about what I'm eating. And I also don't want to feel like there's some moral cost associated with enjoying something wonderful for my culture like chai.
- Tejal: I can totally understand that. There is nothing compared to dairy milk tea. Almond milk tea does not cut it.
- Tejal and Jesal: [laughs]
- Jesal: Absolutely not.
- Tejal: Growing up I felt like I was vividly aware of being different for so many reasons. And that being vegetarian was just one more burden and that much more work. Like staying over at a friend's place to play a little bit longer in the evenings would usually involve having dinner with their family and eating meat definitely made assimilating and integrating that much less difficult.
- Jesal: Yeah, it's a tough question when it comes to non violence and non harming because it's so multi dimensional and for you, as a daughter of an immigrant family, you're just trying to not feel excluded or othered, right? You just want to fit in and be a part of the norm, and not feel like that's going to hurt you in some way to do something different.
- Tejal: Yeah. And to add to that, I think in the West, we think Ahimsa and diet and jump to veganism, but it's valuable for folks to know that actually, historically, there have been many other interpretations of Ahimsa when it comes to diet. Like Jains, Buddhists, and even different sects of Hinduism interpret Ahimsa differently when it comes to food, even though these religions experienced a lot of development during the same time period as each other, and to yoga. For that matter, I'm sure it'd be interesting to share what the yogic texts say about diet.
- Jesal: Yeah, we'll get to the yogic texts at the end, but let's start with Jainism. Jainism is a religion that's centered around what they call the vows, which correspond to the five Yamas that we're familiar with in yoga, and the strongest focus is on Ahimsa. So like vegans, they don't eat meat, eggs and honey, but they do consume milk, unlike vegans. And they also take Ahimsa another step further by not eating any plants that grow underground. So things like potatoes, carrots, onions, garlic, beat.

- Tejal: Totally off the list. Jain philosophy says that pulling something out by the root means you're killing its entire ecosystem, and losing its chance that it can ever grow again. So you're killing the whole plant, and all the microorganisms that survive on that plant -- thousands and hundreds of thousands of lives.
- Jesal: Yeah. I grew up with a lot of Jains, so I'm just going to say that not all Jains follow the dietary guidelines to the T and I know that my friends growing up, they were children of immigrants too. So they wanted to assimilate similar to the way that you did, but actually really strict Jains go further than what we mentioned. Strict Jains don't drink unfiltered water, alcohol, eat fermented foods or food that has been stored overnight because that would mean killing microorganisms from the fermentation process. And again on holidays, strict Jains don't eat leafy greens because they're said to hold countable, though not infinite, lives. So much more stringent than even what we were initially going through.
- Tejal: Right. My Masi, or my mom's sister, who lived with us and shared bunk beds with me during childhood practiced Jainism, and most of her menu items would be different at every meal. It was never seen as a burden, though. And it definitely did increase the amount of food prep every meal. And although it does sound pretty restrictive, it works if you're cooking your own meals every day, which isn't a modern day occurrence.
- Jesal: No. And I also think that when you grow up with it, and you're in a family that's normalized to it, it's very different than like trying to be Jain and like try have Thanksgiving with your family that has turkey all the time. So that's very different. And that's not even the strictest of the Jain beliefs, there's more. Really strict Jains have other Ahimsa-based food restrictions, like not eating at night because insects get killed by the lights being on or like can fly into your mouth and you can't see it.
- Jesal: I read an article in which a Jain monk talked about eating every bit of food offered to her because, "If you throw it away like that, if you put it in the dustbin, it's going to accumulate micro organisms, and they're going to die." So again, more consideration about those microorganisms. On the flip side, I read about a Jain practice called Santhara, where a Jain who has surpassed worldly attachment takes a voluntary vow of fasting to death.
- Tejal: Woah. That's kinda like Mahasamadhi, but fasting to death adds a different element to the whole thing.

Jesal: Yeah. And can you imagine if this is what was taught in yoga teacher trainings as how to practice Ahimsa?

Tejal: I cannot imagine that. I cannot imagine what people would think hearing that maybe on day one or day five of their yoga teacher training. They would probably just walk out the door.

Jesal: Yeah. I think like to a lot of meat eaters, that's how it feels to be told that Ahimsa equals veganism. You might as well be telling everybody that they can't eat any vegetables grown under the ground or drink unfiltered water. And I think it would be shocking even for vegans to hear that there's another version of Ahimsa going on here, like a more extreme version of the Ahimsa going on. So I think all of us just need to slow our role when it comes to telling people how to eat in a nonviolent way.

Tejal: I was reading about Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and I can't help but think of a quote I read from him that goes, "Look and see how the sugarcane is cut down. After cutting away its branches, its feet are bound together into bundles, and then it is placed between the wooden rollers and crushed. What punishment is inflicted upon it? Its juices extracted and placed in the cauldron. As it is heated, it groans and cries out and then the crushed cane is collected and burt in the fire below. Come people and see how the sweet sugarcane is treated."

Jesal: I like the emotion in that.

Tejal: Yes. I feel like I was on stage.

Tejal and Jesal: [laughs]

Tejal: So he's basically trolling people that take vegetarianism too seriously. Because he says no matter what you eat, you are taking a life, or many lives if we're talking microorganisms. It reminds me vividly of how we made vegetable stock this weekend at my house -- there was so much root vegetable waste.

Jesal: Yeah, waste is never a good thing. But the Guru Nanak quote reminds me of being at the ashram because the question around vegetarianism came up when I was in India. And the teacher basically said something similar to Guru Nanak, she said -- No matter what, we are taking life when we eat. So we have to just consider some things -- that meat is a dense form of energy, and it's easily available, but it requires a lot of energy to digest. And the spirit within that meat

is farther along the karmic cycle because they had to live more lives to get to that animal place. Versus vegetables, which is plant-based matter, is more subtle in energy and it's harder to access that energy, but it doesn't require as much digestive energy to get that energy from the plants. And those plants aren't as far along or as close to the karmic finish line, quote, if you will.

Tejal: That's a very deep way to look at life that loops in karma theory. I think at another time, I'd love for us to dive more into karma theory and Sanchita karma and what we bring with us into this life from the past. I've actually never heard that justification and moral relativism in the West when we talk as yogis about eating vegan or vegetarian. So far, the interpretations of Ahimsa sound very different from some of the Buddhist interpretations, though there are several different ones depending on the sect of Buddhism. Some sects are strictly against eating meat, but many Buddhists eat meat as long as it wasn't killed specifically for their own consumption. And others say there is no restriction whatsoever and the emphasis is on Ahimsa towards other human beings.

Tejal: There's a story that a Brahman confronted the Buddha about instituting vegetarianism in the Sangha. And the Buddhist countered the argument by listing acts which cause real moral defilement and said that consuming of meat is not an equivalent act to say killing, stealing, or adultery.

Jesal: Yeah. I would agree with that.

Tejal: There's also another interpretation where the Buddha said that one should accept whatever food is offered to them, probably because it could be considered harmful to self and others to reject the offering. Like how does it feel when you don't want to take a gift from somebody? Or how does it feel when you're giving a gift to somebody and they just keep saying no to you? And the Dalai Lama promotes vegetarianism when possible and eats meat himself.

Jesal: Yeah, I actually read that Paul McCartney sent the Dalai Lama a letter about it because Paul McCartney is a member of PETA and an ardent vegan. And the Dalai Lama responded saying that his doctor said he needed meat for his health. And then Paul McCartney wrote back telling him that his doctors were wrong.

Tejal: That's pretty intense. I'm almost speechless hearing that. Like I said though, I've been vegetarian before, but I definitely feel less healthy. Not to liken me to the Dalai Lama, say, but --

Jesal: [laughs] Are you trying to liken--

- Tejal: -- but if you want to make that comparison, I won't complain [laughs].
- Tejal: When I don't eat me, I can do it, but I don't feel my best. And then I've met someone on the other side of this, who tried to go vegan, and had to stop because she experienced hair loss.
- Jesal: Yeah, I actually know a lot of people who've told me that they felt really sick not eating meat. And I used to be skeptical because I'm a vegetarian, I've been a lifelong vegetarian. Sso I used to just have a little bit of skepticism around that. But I've seen it enough now in my adulthood to know that that's a real thing. And if you can be vegan because your body is good with it, that's great. But there are also genetic and environmental factors. And for me personally, like I think enough generations of my family have been vegetarian, that my body is adapted to it and so I feel good and I just have to accept that that is the case and that it's not like everybody can't be vegetarian or vegan.
- Tejal: Mhm, yeah, that's true. And it's interesting too, because not all Hindus are vegetarians and I say that because I know you're Hindu, I know I'm Hindu. Actually, about 53% of Hindus in India are meat eaters.
- Jesal: Well, Hinduism probably has one of the most complex relationships with vegetarianism and the interpretations of Ahimsa that we know. And even though I feel like everyone in the West think that Indians don't eat meat and that we pray to cows or something. That's not really the truth.
- Tejal: It's not straightforward at all. And I don't think the phrase "holy cow" helped in shedding the truth on this stereotype. The reality and history is that the Vedic texts have conflicting verses. According to Marvin Harris, some texts suggest ritual slaughter and meat consumption, while others suggest a taboo on meat eating. The author Nanditha Krishna, says the Rigveda condemns all killings of men, cattle and horses, and to pray to god Agni, to punish those who kill. Then according to Harris, from ancient times, vegetarianism became a well accepted mainstream Hindu tradition. The Manusmriti discusses diet in chapter five, where like other Hindu texts, it includes verses that strongly discouraged meat eating, as well as verses where meat eating is declared appropriate in times of adversity and various other circumstances.
- Jesal: Well, that isn't conflicting at all.
- Tejal and Jesal: [laughs]

- Jesal: So what's the reality in India now?
- Tejal: Well, India definitely has the lowest rate of meat consumption in the world. And in our episode resources, I've included a few interesting graphs represented by country, a variety of meats, and the kilograms per capita consumed in that place. So FYI, India and the US are tied in sheep consumption. Poor Mary.
- Jesal: Didn't marry have a lamb and not a sheep?
- Tejal and Jesal: [laughs]
- Tejal: Jes, lamb or sheep it's just an ageist restriction. Less than one year is a lamb older than that is a sheep.
- Jesal: Well, I don't know, you're talking to a vegetarian over here. I think wrong audience for that joke, sorry.
- Tejal and Jesal: [laughs]
- Jesal: I wonder how accurate the numbers really are, though. Because I know many people in India who eat meat but like on the DL because they don't want their parents and families to find out.
- Tejal: Yes, definitely. It reminds me in a way of the Master of None, season one episode where Aziz and his cousin disagree on eating pork in front of their folks. Because one was hiding it and the other was like, why are you hiding it? I totally get that. Growing up certain family members would give me grossed out looks about eating meat, or even just knowing that I ate meat, not in front of them, but just knowing that I did.
- Jesal: Yeah, my mom was like that with people too.
- Tejal: Right! And with my wedding planning coming up, it's becoming a very interesting consideration, since my partner is Mexican and Puerto Rican, and I have plenty of traditional Indian vegetarian family members. It's really no surprise that I found research stating the reported number of meat eaters in India is underestimated because of this stigma, and get this, the physical harm inflicted upon meat eaters.
- Jesal: Wait, so people who eat meat are being physically harmed? That sounds like the total opposite of Ahimsa.

- Tejal: Yes, physically, violently harmed. And I'll tell you some more. According to the Human Rights Watch between May 2015 and December 2018, 44 people suspected of killing or transporting cows to slaughter, or even just eating beef were killed in cow vigilante attacks carried out by fundamentalist Hindus. That number of people murdered included 36 Muslim people, and it hasn't slowed. There are at least four deaths reported this year. It is horrible to think that some Hindus believe it's their right to take a person's life over the life of a cow.
- Jesal: Yeah, that is so messed up.
- Tejal: Especially considering the karmic ladder of rebirth and how many lives it takes to get to a human life form.
- Jesal: And this is all in the name of Ahimsa.
- Tejal: It's completely ironic and ridiculous.
- Tejal: Researchers state that only about 20% of Indians are actually vegetarian, much lower than you might think, much lower than I thought. So I'm interested in learning how religion and caste plays a part in these numbers. The pervasive historic and prejudiced groupings of people by class is what I mean by caste. How some of that religious rhetoric seems to have filtered into certain guidelines around what a yogi should eat. In India, Hindus make up 80% of the population. Only a third of the privileged upper caste of those are vegetarians.
- Jesal: So when you say upper caste Hindus, you're primarily referring to Brahmins aka the priest class, of which my family is a part of. And so I was born a Brahmin. And here's the thing: I was told growing up that all Brahmins are vegetarians. And so I believed that for a long time. And then one time we were on a trip to India, and I learned that one of my Massas, my mom's sister's husband, was eating fish, even though he's Brahmin. When I found that out, my parents were like, "Oh, he's from the south and in the south they eat fish." And I'm like, "Mmm, something isn't adding up here." So I started doing some digging and read that there may have been a time when Brahmins sacrificed goats and horses as part of Hindu rituals.
- Jesal: So what I was taught about Brahmins being vegetarian because of Ahimsa has started to unravel, like a lot. And from my research, it seems like a lot of scriptures around vegetarianism being a form of Ahimsa developed in response to the ritual slaughter and the norm of eating meat as a way to shift the status quo.

Tejal: That sounds like the powerful, or the upper caste, wanted to change the rules for everybody, regardless of how it fit lifestyle, location, economic status. Which leads me to believe there's more going on with caste and vegetarianism, and that it may have to do with privilege and access. To be upper caste in India means historically, you've had major advantages of finding jobs, having jobs saved for you, and that those jobs pay higher than others. Over time, this creates generational wealth, or at least keeps your family in good financial standing. The top 10% upper caste households hold 60% of the wealth in the country, growing annually in the double digits, and certain marginalized caste groups earn 21 to 34% less than the national average.

Tejal: So now in modern day, we're starting to see this bigger picture of who is wealthy and the fallacy of the idea that most Indians are vegetarians. How did these generalizations come to speak for all of India? Well, how about these thoughts -- any generalization about large segments of the population is a function of who speaks for the group. This power to represent communities, regions, or even the entire country is what makes the stereotypes. The term non-vegetarian is a good case in point. It signals the social power of vegetarian classes, including their power to classify foods, to create a food hierarchy, wherein vegetarian food is the default and is having a higher status than meat. Thus, it is akin to the term non-whites coined by whites to capture an incredibly diverse population who they colonized.

Jesal: Yeah, that's so interesting, because in India, the prevalent term *is* non-veg whereas I feel like it's kind of more mixed here. So it does show like the power of that one social group, especially in that area. But I do think that there's a parallel here in the US, especially in terms of the privilege and access that you mentioned. For example, in 2010, the USDA reported that 23.5 million Americans live in food deserts, meaning that if they live in an urban or suburban area, they live more than one mile from a supermarket. And if they live in a rural area, they live more than 10 miles from a supermarket.

Jesal: Food deserts mean that residents lack access to fresh fruits and vegetables and other whole foods. They tend to be more populated by low income residents who either work so much they don't have time to travel to the grocery store that, you know, is way out of their way. Or they live in areas where they need a car but don't own one or have direct access to one. So either way, they end up relying on processed foods from convenience stores. Safety can also be an issue, meaning that sometimes folks have to travel through high crime areas in order to get to these faraway grocery stores. And so they choose to stay safe over getting fresh food.

Jesal: And when we talk about access to food, let's not forget that in the US it costs more in terms of upfront dollars to eat healthier. Harvard School of Public Health concluded that on average, it costs \$1.50 more per person per day to eat the healthiest diet pattern, whatever they deemed that was, versus the unhealthiest diet pattern. So for a family of four that can add up to around \$180 a month! And there's other research saying the cost difference is even higher than that. And that sounds like a ridiculous amount of money to spend when we compare it to the amount of support given to folks who needs to be on supplemental food programs. For example, women who are eligible for the WIC Program receive either an \$8 or \$10 *monthly* voucher for fresh fruits and vegetables for their entire family.

Jesal: And the USDA has even put out research saying that the buying power of these vouchers vary significantly from region to region. I mean, we live in New York City and going to a typical grocery store, I don't think \$8 is going to buy you even like one package of fresh fruits and vegetables. And I know most people who don't live in this city think that like Whole Foods is an expensive grocery store -- outside of the city, it is. But when you live in New York City, just to it put into perspective, Whole Foods is like mid-tier in terms of pricing.

Tejal: This all brings us around to why it can be so harmful, so full of *Himsa* to push the rhetoric that veganism or vegetarianism is the only path to practice Ahimsa as a yogi. Because it reinforces that whoever has the means to buy food according to those diets are the people who should be practicing yoga. And it reinforces that there is only one way to eat one when practicing yoga, creating an environment of judgment -- a hierarchy -- between those who do not consume animal meat and dairy products and those who do.

Jesal: Yeah, I one hundred percent agree with that. And I don't say that lightly because again, I'm a lifelong vegetarian, and I've often been food shamed for my choices. I think it's really common for meat eaters in the West to shame vegetarians and vegans for their choices in the West. Which is why I think some of this, some of the talk around vegetarianism and veganism is so loud, it's like a backlash almost to the shame that we feel.

Tejal: We really don't think anyone needs to be shamed for their food choices. And sometimes there's a misconception that being vegan or vegetarian is just an excuse to be uppity or high maintenance. That's not the case, either. This summer I hosted a yoga retreat and one of the classes was planned at 8 a.m. at a vineyard with a wine tasting and brunch planned for after the class. I sent the owner and manager the list of dietary needs for the retreaters, including a few

vegetarians, a few non-dairy, a few pescatarians, somebody preferred whole foods. So there was a sundry list of things people needed. And the owner mistakenly wrote *me* back instead of her employees with this one line: high maintenance crowd to say the least.

Jesal: Uh-oh.

Tejal: Yeah.

Tejal: Of course, I took a moment and then decided that that now becomes a teachable moment. So I wrote her the following email and response, "Thanks for your responses yesterday, I reviewed your emails and wish to further explain why reframing the language about the group is important to me. Our group isn't high maintenance, rather simply honoring their bodies and trusting that I am able to offer a healing yoga and wellness retreat respecting their wishes. There are so many reasons why people have dietary preferences or restrictions, whether it be due to health, religion, environmental considerations. I personally do not know the reasons behind each preference. However, one guest recently underwent an emergency appendectomy and has a very restricted, limited, modified diet. As a business owner myself, I aim to make my yoga classes and offerings accessible for everybody because I wish to hold space for all people as well as understanding it's simply smart business. I hope that my partners aim for the same. That being said, I appreciate your ownership and apology. I'm happy to take you up on your offer to accommodate us if you're willing to host us."

Jesal: So it sounds like she apologized.

Tejal: She did. She said, "I'm not a bad person, but I behaved badly in that situation. Please accept my apology."

Jesal: Okay, that's fair. So she admitted that she behaved badly. But that's the thing, like why are we shaming anybody about any of their choices? We never know what's going on. And I think part of this also has to do with all these myths around health and food, like vegetarians don't get enough protein or nutrition, and that we're somehow missing out on meat. I mean, every diet comes with its own misconceptions. And in the yoga world, the shaming happens, like all the ways, but I think most often, we tend to see people who are leaders that are vegan and vegetarian, and they're shaming the meat eaters in the room.

Jesal: So basically, what I'm trying to say is that there's different combinations of food and diet shaming, and they have one thing in common: it leaves people feeling bad about themselves. And speaking of people feeling bad about themselves, I

think what's happening more and more is that all these different diets, including vegetarianism and veganism, is just becoming a proxy for thinness. For dieting and thinness. I know a lot of people do veganism, for example, for ethical and environmental reasons, even though this has problems of its own. In some places where plant foods don't easily grow, eating plant-based means eating food that has traveled a very long distance, causing other environmental impacts.

Jesal: And vegans and fellow vegetarians, um, you're really not going to want to hear this, and I didn't like reading it. But, it turns out that during the industrial farming process, lots of field mice, woodchucks, birds, insects, and countless other animals are killed during and after harvesting.

Tejal: Well, it just seems we are constantly assessing the cost vs. benefit of our food choices, and the stakes are high. This is not a time to take the impacts of our choices as they affect the environment lightly. There are movements all over the world to enact immediate change around all of our uses of the land, air, space, earth, and water. For the intro period of my learning about and using nut milks, I thought, "Well, of course, these are better choices than dairy milk, and the unclear and shady ways that dairy cows are treated and fed." It didn't take that long, though, for me to question how these nuts were being farmed. Take Kuwaili, for example, one of Hawaii's most beautiful islands. There's an entire section of that island devoted to GMO seed and toxin testing. The public cannot even drive through that area of the island.

Tejal: For years, in Kuwaili, multinational agro-chemical companies have developed genetically modified seeds by using pesticides to test the resilience of these seeds before export. The testing exposes everyone there to the toxins. In an interview with *Outside Magazine*, Gary Hooser, a former County Councilman, and one of the island's highest ranking public officials said, "For me, this is about the impact on our community, not on whether Doritos have GMOs or not. This is one of our many Standing Rocks," he said. "Where corporate power and profit collide with indigenous rights and the rights of communities to determine their future and people's determination to protect their land and water."

Tejal: Over and over again, we're faced with extreme choices around living healthier, and reducing our carbon footprints, and the elevated urgency around climate change and its devastating effects.

Jesal: Basically, in our modern capitalistic world, we're shaming individuals for what are actually global, industrial problems. And, I as an individual obviously want to do better for the environment and I don't eat meat already, but now I have to

take on, what? Eggs, dairy, grains, nut milk, soy, and who knows what else, just to be cool and an environmentalist? And don't even ever watch the show *Rotten* on Netflix because the food industry is so harmful to so many people right now. There are negative consequences to basically eating anything and everything you haven't grown yourself. So, I think more importantly, let's recognize that these issues have to do with government and industry much more than just individual choices.

Tejal: Well, we could pull from the *Captain Incredible* movie and live on our own farm, the "Yoga is Dead" farm.

Jesal: [laughs] That sounds fun.

Tejal and Jesal: [laughs]

Jesal: And speaking of global issues that we blame entirely on individuals, let's talk about wellness.

Tejal: Well, well, wellness. It's another area where we've convinced ourselves that it's all about individual action and self care, when really, there's a lot of harmful global messaging going on that health and wellness equals thinness, as guided by the diet industry and even the medical industry. That message seeps in and affects our thoughts and actions, and people end up pushed towards disorder, or holding distorted ideas around body image, and end up feeling that their success and importance and relevance relies on how they look on the outside.

Jesal: Yeah, we use a lot of coded language as a way to justify our unhealthy obsession with thinness. One person may say they're going "vegan" or "vegetarian," while another person might say "keto" or "paleo" or "clean eating" or "wellness." We use wellness as a way to conflate health with dieting and thinness in our industry, and it's happening more and more because yoga has become a part of the fitness industry. Just think of the imagery in your mind around what fitness is. Like, Tejal, what comes to mind when I say "wellness" and what a "healthy person" looks like?

Tejal: For me, it's majority those posters I see all over the city: rock hard abs, glistening, long limbs, size zero, perfect hair (which is odd), people rubbing up on each other in sexy ways and in poses with a slogan that feels cult-like.

Jesal: And, weirdly, you're not even picturing athletes. You know, you're not even picturing the very diverse bodies of different athletes. And actually, to give you a story about somebody in the yoga world, like I knew a friend -- she told me

she wouldn't go to spin classes because she didn't want her thighs to get big because she wanted them to look good in jeans.

Tejal: She knew how to... reach her goal? I don't really know what to say to that. It just seems very distorted, like what we're talking about.

Jesal: Yeah and I think that's really prevalent in the yoga industry, that we have to fit into this, like, particular slim, slender, model image. And it all comes from this wellness culture. In the *New York Times*, they published an op-ed by Jessica Knoll titled, "Smash the Wellness Industry." And in it, she writes "that wellness culture is a dangerous con that seduces smart women with pseudo-scientific claims of increasing energy, reducing inflammation, lowering the risk of cancer, and healing skin, gut, and fertility problems. But at its core, wellness is about weight loss. It demonizes calorically-dense and delicious foods, preserving a vicious fallacy: thin is healthy and healthy is thin."

Tejal: Yeah, we're talking about diet culture. Dieting is nothing new. In fact, there's a book by Louise Foxcroft called *Calories and Corsets*, that traces back our complicated relationship with food to the ancient Greeks and Romans, and along to the Judeo-Christians. And then, Dr. Sabrina Strings traces back the racist roots of diet culture to the Renaissance. But according to Michael Pollan and his book, *In Defense of Food*, "Dieting took on a whole new evolution, thanks to nutritionism, or the idea that the nutritional value of a food is the sum of all of its individual nutrients, vitamins, and other components."

Tejal: In the '80s, we saw this take on a life of its own in supermarkets, with the food industry vilifying certain components, like fats, not clarifying which fats are better than others, and then producing non-fat, processed foods. We know now that there is nothing wrong with consuming naturally occurring fats and that a food is made up of more than its sum parts, but we still continue to vilify individual components, like carbs and sugar. So, over time, we've evolved this into diet culture, also known as a specific belief system. Registered Dietitian Hannah Magee defines this system, which "demonizes certain ways of eating and elevates others; heavily encourages the pursuit of weight loss and smaller body size through diet, exercise, and other lifestyle habits; encourages those 'lesser than' feelings that lead us to attempt weight loss via dieting, food restriction, calorie counting, eliminating food components (like sugar or carbs or even entire food groups); and by encouraging other rules that disguise themselves as lifestyle changes."

Tejal: Diet culture equates smaller body size with not only better health, but also moral value. It makes one feel lesser-than for not achieving the thin ideal that

one may not be ever meant to achieve. And it also idealize thinness, smaller body sizes, and places an emphasis on body weight and body size as important health outcomes. Diet culture also causes us to just unnecessarily obsess over our food choices and tells us we should feel guilty when we consume something less than ideal. It often disguises itself as wellness, clean eating, detoxing, ancestral diets, and other things that we've mentioned.

Jesal: Yeah, diet culture is the opposite of Ahimsa, because it causes so much harm. It basically oppresses people in larger bodies and makes the assumption that those in larger bodies are unhealthy, when that simply isn't the case and research totally debunks this myth. For example, Tejal, you told me the story about your friend who was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease and had plantar fasciitis, and when she went to the doctor, her doctor told her to lose weight. When you told me this story, I was seething in anger for days. Okay, for those of you who don't know, you don't have to be fat to get plantar fasciitis or have an autoimmune disease. In fact, I know lots of people who are thin and have both of those things.

Jesal: So, being in a larger body really has nothing to do with it and I think if your friend had been thin, I just wonder, like, what would the doctor have said then? She probably would have recommended some actual corrective action. I'll even speak for myself. I have an autoimmune disease - I have psoriasis. And I've been everything from a size two to a size fourteen, and my autoimmune didn't just disappear overnight because I was a size two. Food played a part in helping me manage my symptoms, but it wasn't about losing weight at any cost or anything like that. It's just knowing what my food triggers are for my individual body, and then just managing around that.

Tejal: It just shows, this is important work to do, even if it rubs some people the wrong way, for whatever reason. I'd love to highlight Sonalee Rashatwar, The Fat Sex Therapist, whose work is healing and aimed at ending fatphobia, redefining self-love and sex, and all by dismantling Western civilization's harmful afflictions on image and diet. You can actually find her on Instagram, @thefatsextherapist. But researching really opened my eyes to the reality that I'm not excused from the comments and comparisons. I've started to notice more the comments about my body shape and size, and I've started to remember more incidents, so it's not just about hearing them now, when I'm working or practicing in the yoga world, but it's also about looking back and realizing there's an entire collection of things that have been said to me over and over, related to body image, shape, and size.

Tejal: For whatever reason, it's so culturally ingrained to talk about this as South Asian brown folks. I have this amazing book called *Trust No Aunty*, by Maria Qamar, who is both Gujarati and Bihari, by way of Bangladesh. She writes satirically, and illustrates beautifully, about the cultural generalizations pushed on Indian women from well-meaning, but intrusive, aunties. Those aunties can be friends of the family, or they're actually relatives as well. Part Four of the book is called "Beauty, Body, and Color," which neatly sums up the drama we Desi folks experience about appearance. I really resonated with the chapter's scenario, especially when they talked about being called healthy.

Jesal: Healthy?

Tejal: Exactly. Someone calling you healthy can mean a few things. It could be when someone has complimented me on my body size, or commented on how I gained weight since they last assessed, neither of which are okay.

Jesal: Yeah. Healthy is not a very clear term in our culture.

Tejal: I've started to realize how often I get comments about my skin color, body shape, and size; and what some might think is a positive remark, like -- "Oh, you look so skinny today" -- so clearly shifts the focus to my outward appearance, as if it reflects on how I'm feeling on the inside. Or, it just successfully shifts the conversation away from something more meaningful. The comments come from everyone, too -- my family, my friends, my yoga community, people I haven't seen in a while, just, everyone. All of these experiences came back to me while working on this episode, and I wonder if similar realizations happened for you?

Jesal: Well, I think being the shape and size that I am, I've had these realizations a while ago, and I've sort of worked through a lot of them, and I've set some boundaries around it, at least with the people closest to me. For example, my mother-in-law making comments about my weight loss or weight gain, I didn't take very kindly to, and so my husband just, in the beginning of our marriage said, "Mom, you need to just stop making those comments." And she did. That was great; she respected my boundaries around that.

Jesal: The interesting thing about those comments, though, is that it's so apparent that each person has their own idea of what is positive and what is negative. I even mentioned in a previous episode about my large chest, and I get a very mixed reaction about it. Some people think it's really positive, and then some people think it's just a totally negative thing. And, the fashion industry very clearly tells me that I should be thinking about my chest very negatively, and

that I should feel ashamed for having a large chest. And, in those opinions and expectations of everyone else, no one actually bothers to ask me how I feel about it or what my life experience is.

Tejal: Yeah, I agree with you. That's exactly how it seems to come up for me too. There's another piece of this that has been kind of the most surprising, and that was realizing and owning up to my own negative self-talk -- things that I think are flippant comments that I say to myself, or looking at myself, or listening to myself. They're actually negative things, and there's so much more to be mindful about and actively undo in my own thinking, which makes a lot of sense, then, when my own definition and practice of ahimsa has to do with working with non-harming and kind intentions.

Jesal: Yeah. That is a lovely place to start with, starting with our own thought processes, because I think a lot of us can relate to that. I think as a whole, the healthcare, diet, wellness, and fitness industries are working hard to convince us that thin is healthy. This misconception is bad for everyone. It's detrimental to larger folks because they receive substandard health care and they're forced to constantly stress out about their size, which can't be good for anyone's health.

Tejal: Agreed. So much of the conversation is around being thin and getting healthy, or getting thin and getting healthy, that it's quite logical to consider that bigger bodied folks really don't have a starting point and don't receive the information they need accurately. Remember the *Shrill* show on Hulu? In the first episode, you find out the lead protagonist is pregnant, even though she took the morning after pill. Well, folks who are over 175 pounds are three times more likely to get pregnant when using that pill than folks who are less than 175 pounds. And, how about there's an alternative birth control pill, but it's prescription only. So, already, a double barrier to access and a lesser known available resource.

Jesal: Yeah, like I mentioned, larger bodied people often just get diagnosed as needing to lose weight instead of having their health issues actually addressed. But, the idea that being fat is bad actually affects everyone, including thin people. To quote from a book titled *Body Respect*, by Linda Bacon and Lucy Aphramor, "Many people in the categories of 'overweight' and 'obese' live long, disease-free lives." In other words, adiposity (aka fatness) alone, doesn't mean sickness. When we make health assumptions about people based on their weight, we also miss the many thin people who get obesity-associated diseases.

Jesal: Famous functional doctor, Dr. Mark Hyman, coined the term "skinny-fat" to describe these people who look thin and have a low BMI, but actually have very little muscle mass and suffer from all the same risk factors and diseases we

typically associate with "obese" people. In essence, our conception of obesity is completely false; and, on top of that, people of all sizes who lose weight because of a sickness that hasn't been detected or diagnosed yet, something like cancer, they may not receive the testing and care that they need because most of the medical industry still sees us losing weight as a good thing, as opposed to maintaining homeostasis.

Tejal: When it comes to weight, we often think exercise is the answer. And so we've seen in the yoga industry the obsession with hashtag #yogaeverydamnday, but I've come across several sources that say that marathon runners, people we assumed to be among the fittest, are actually a group that's at high risk for heart attacks, due to heart stress and scarring, and a myriad of other factors.

Jesal: I just watched an episode of *Red Table Talk* where Will Smith gathered his whole family together to talk about health. And, from the outward appearance of it, that whole family is super fit looking. When they sat down with Holistic Nutritionist Mona Sharma, most of them realized that although they look good on the outside, they actually weren't feeling well on the inside. I think as yoga continues to be engulfed in the fitness industry, we keep perpetuating the emphasis of outward appearance over inward feeling. I think what most people don't realize is when we use fat-phobic or fitness center language, in yoga spaces, we're doing a lot of harm. We're just making people focus on that outward appearance rather than that inward experience. We need to be careful about making assumptions that someone is in our class to lose weight, burn calories, or get more tone, because maybe they're just coming here to feel good in their own body.

Tejal: You know, I've had students ask me about the calorie burn count after my class and I have to work visibly not to cringe. Because several things: why someone would think I know that information for their specific health history and body is beyond me; why someone is coming to yoga and then caring more about the calorie count than what other benefits you might get is beyond me. I don't need to know, but I also wonder why are those the questions? The fitness aspect of yoga is very hard not to focus on these days, especially because certain class levels and practice types ask for strength beyond sitting or standing in a shape for several breaths. There can be floating, flying, arm balancing, head balancing, sometimes even hand balancing expected in the more advanced or dynamic style classes.

Tejal: I watched a video as part of an inclusivity training where Teo Drake, a yogi and blue-collar, queer-identified, trans man living with AIDS described how painful it can be to hear poses offered as advanced or challenging. He said, "Look,

sometimes simply even getting out of bed can be challenging, or stepping onto the mat, or even trying to touch my toes can be advanced." He highlights the idea and the reality that you don't know what's going on for someone. It turned around the meaning of the words for me. We try very hard in the fitness world to push people into these boxes, when we'd be better off celebrating each other for simply showing up.

Jesal: It goes back to that idea of non-harming in thought, word, and deed. And so, even if you didn't have that non-harming in thought, your deed was harming in that case, right? It's not just the harms that we've already mentioned, but really, fat phobia is rooted in sexism and racism, too. I referenced sociologists, Dr. Sabrina Strings, who wrote a book called *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. In that book, she talks about how the history of "race science" was used to falsely distinguish white people as having discipline and self control over their impulses, and then used, in turn, to glorify the tall and slender Anglo or Nordic body type, and then make the stereotype that black people didn't have control over their impulses, and therefore, they weren't slender. While diet culture absolutely affects all genders, it disproportionately affects those who don't identify as this cisgendered male.

Tejal: In response to diet culture, and also its intersection with racism and sexism in yoga, we've seen the body positivity movement emerge. Leaders like Jessamyn Stanley and Dianne Bondi come to the top of my mind. There are also a lot of others that we've highlighted in our episode "Resources," so please take a look when you can. Outside of the yoga world, I already mentioned Sonalee Rashatwar. Then of course, Lizzo, taking the world by storm. Let's just share this thought of hers on body positivity. She says, "It's not a label I wanted to put on myself; it's just my existence. All these fucking hashtags to convince people that the way you look is fine. Isn't that fucking crazy? I say 'I love myself,' and they're like, 'Oh my gosh, she's so brave. She's so political.' For what? All I said is, 'I love myself, bitch.' Even, when body positivity is over, it's not like I'm going to be a thin, white woman. I'm going to be black and fat. That's just hopping on a trend and expecting people to blindly love themselves. That's fake love. I'm trying to figure out how to actually live it." So, there you have it, hashtags and Instagram, the worst -- am I right?

Jesal: Yeah, I mean, people keep asking us to do this episode on "Instagram Killed Yoga." We'll see if we ever get there.

Tejal: In addition to everyone we've mentioned, of course, Jameela Jamil also comes to mind because she's taking social media influencers, celebrities, and the entertainment world at large to task over harmful images they're putting out

there, that are based on lies and exaggeration. Lots and lots of people, like you said, have asked us to do that entire episode on Instagram. We don't know if we'll do it or not, but Jameela has not only called out Instagram influencers for selling products that are dangerous, like glorified laxatives, but also for lying and saying that certain products made them thin, when the reality is that many of these people are doing extreme dieting, over-exercising, and paying for nutritionists, personal chefs, personal trainers, a whole team of personal approaches, and getting specialized medical treatments to achieve their preferred results. Then, on top of that, celebrities still get the airbrush treatment in photos. Let's take a moment to celebrate that Jameela's gotten Instagram to agree, at least, not to promote diet products to minors.

Jesal: Woot, woot! Small victories. Yeah when we think of who the social media influencers are, a significant portion of them work in the yoga industry or project that they work in the yoga industry, or at least they look like they're really good at yoga, whatever that means. I think that's why so many people want us to do this Instagram episode.

Tejal: Instead of an episode, for now, let's just say, when we follow influencers that make us feel bad or othered or less than about our food choices and our bodies, really, what we do is enable the part of our minds that gets stuck in these thought loops, these endless cycles, this citta vritti cycle.

Jesal: I think all of us have certain thought patterns that we keep coming back to, which is probably why we practice yoga in the first place, to help us recognize and stop obsessive and unsupportive thinking. Sometimes media, social media, and even our yoga teachers and colleagues don't let us break these unhealthy thought patterns and, instead, we get obsessive about what we eat. This has become a condition known as orthorexia nervosa, or just simply orthorexia. Well, it's not formally recognized as a diagnosis yet, it is becoming recognized more and more. It's a term that was coined in 1998 and refers to an obsession with proper or "healthful" eating.

Jesal: I'm going to read the warning signs of orthorexia, according to the National Eating Disorders Association. The warning signs are compulsive checking of ingredient lists and nutritional labels, an increase in concern about the health of ingredients, cutting out a number of food groups (example: all sugars, all carbs, all dairy, all meat, all animal products, et cetera), an inability to eat anything but a narrow group of foods that are deemed healthy or pure, unusual interest in the health of what others are eating, spending hours per day thinking about what food might be served at upcoming events, showing high levels of distress when "safe" or "healthy" foods aren't available, obsessive following of food and

healthy lifestyle blogs on Twitter or Instagram, body image concerns that may or may not be present.

Jesal: That list is so fascinating to me because I've absolutely experienced peer pressure around some of these things, like peers that want me to almost be orthorexic with them, and I've felt shamed because I was offered sugar and I ate it and then the person next to me, who was clearly obsessing about sugar, would have to say out loud, "No, I just can't, because sugar is so bad for me," when all they had to say was, "No, thanks." Actually, I was working with a client who was battling an eating disorder and one day in the summer she was eating watermelon and her roommate, just before a private yoga session, came in and commented on how much sugar there was in watermelon, and I feel like these types of things happen so often. It's so messed up.

Tejal: Well, I'll say that list you read off certainly strikes a chord. It made me uncomfortable first read through. Coincidentally, I had a convo with someone today who was reading another book on "body positivity," and skipped certain parts because they find it triggering and a little too close to home. But, it may be time to normalize these conversations. So I'll share something that I used to do. I enjoyed counting calories about 13 years ago, but for a reason I wouldn't call healthy. I was working out regularly and logging my workout calories burned and tracking my food calorie intake and trying to get to whatever my desired ratio of carbs, fat, protein was at the time, which, at this point, is that even healthy? It's probably really outdated.

Jesal: For sure, obsessing over it is not healthy, the stress of it.

Tejal: And I'm trying to hit some arbitrary ratio goal, like some rule. But my goal was to net out, which is what I look back and kind of shudder at. Like, have calories burned equal calories consumed for the day. It was a game or something and I was fascinated with it at the time, possibly a little too preoccupied. So, I think for all the reasons we talked about, it's really hard to stay away from caring about diet and image. It seems important to care about it if you want to look healthy or seem fit. There's an allure to being able to add to the conversation when people talk or complain, really, about what they're eating and hoping to change about themselves. Like, it keeps you in the "in circle," since it's almost always a topic. Maybe if we could have these conversations and drop the more helpful contra-knowledge, more often we really could highlight the concerning parts and behaviors and be preventative in our approach rather than reactive when it comes to diet, culture, and body image.

Jesal: Yeah, I think because the “in circle” is so obsessed with talking about these “healthy food trends,” that sadly, we do need safe spaces in the yoga industry, and I know a lot of people come to yoga to recover from an eating disorder and that's the last thing they need, a place that enables that sort of disordered thinking. I was talking to Maris Degener, who made the documentary *I Am Maris*, where she talks about how yoga played an important role in supporting her recovery from an eating disorder. But, she even expressed concern to me that this was happening, and lucky for her, she found a space that was a safe space away from these conversations. When I talked to her, she even said that she was growing more and more concerned that there weren't as many safe spaces for people recovering from eating disorders.

Jesal: Then I talked to my friend, Alia Khan, the owner of East Side Yoga in DC, and Oak and Lotus Yoga in Austin, because she dedicated a whole section on her website to “Eating With Joy.” I asked her about this, and she told me that by embracing food unconditionally, she was able to attract people to her studio that usually feel uncomfortable in yoga studios. Not just folks with eating disorders, but actual everyday people who just wouldn't look or act like the typical yogi and who just don't fit into the diet culture space and feel really uncomfortable in spaces where they're made to feel like they have to be vegan in order to practice yoga.

Tejal: According to Swami Vivekananda, orthorexia isn't all that new. These patterns of behaviors, and even these thought processes, existed a while ago, even though we have a term for it now. He wrote about it in his book *Bhakti Yoga*, and I'll read an abridged version of his long quote: “The beginner, therefore, must pay particular attention to all such dietetic rules, as have come down from the line of his accredited teachers. But the extravagant, meaningless fanaticism, which has driven religion entirely to the kitchen, without any hope of the noble truth of that religion ever coming out to the sunlight of spirituality, is a peculiar sort of pure and simple materialism. It is neither Jnana, nor Bhakti, nor Karma. It is a special kind of lunacy, and those who pin their souls to it are more likely to go to the lunatic asylums than to Brahmaloaka.”

Jesal: Mike drop.

Tejal: Basically, he is saying we should pay attention to what we eat, but we shouldn't become obsessive about it, and what's interesting is that he calls out the obsessiveness around food as a form of materialism, because that's what diet culture is. It's consumerism to sell people more stuff to help them fit an unattainable ideal.

Jesal: In the quote, Swami Vivekananda refers to dietetic rules. And, actually, we didn't even cover what any of the yogic texts say yet about food and diet, and I think if you've never read about it, it's surprising to hear. Like, Tejal, when I say yogic diet, what comes to your mind?

Tejal: I think nuts and berries, and I think cave dwellers who go into nearby towns carrying their steel matki to ask for wheat and water, and the townspeople are acclimated to this begging so they offer what they have portioned out, to give to the Sadhus.

Jesal: Yeah, I picture something very similar and when I went through the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* I was surprised to see what it said. It says, "The most conducive foods for yogis are good grains: wheat, rice, barley, milk, ghee, brown sugar, sugar candy (crystallized sugar), honey, dry ginger, cucumber, five vegetables (which are not specified in this book) mung and such pulses, and pure water." And then, it went on to mention milk and ghee in several other passages and other texts as well.

Tejal: Well, that sounds delicious. I mean, it's basically like, "Eat candy. Oh, and some vegetables."

Jesal: Yeah, I mean, I loved reading that description. It just makes me feel so -- it's so freeing.

Tejal: This is basically the opposite of things we've heard in the now -- go dairy free, sugar free, and grain free -- that we're obsessed with. And, it doesn't line up at all with any particular modern dietary guidelines.

Jesal: Yes, and it specifically mentions dairy and honey is one of the "pure" foods, which I find interesting considering all the yoga studios saying that you have to practice veganism to be a yogi.

Tejal: Is this the same as sattvic food?

Jesal: Well, it's unclear, actually. In many texts, it's referred to as mitahara, but then other texts use the word sattvic and define sattvic as pure, essential, natural, vital, energy giving, clean, conscious, true, honest, wise. So, really, it's unclear if those two things are the same thing; I think they're linked. Suffice it to say that, overall, we're just back to the beginning here when it comes to what to eat as a yogi because I don't think any of the strict rules that we've been talking about apply to the "yogic diet" we just described.

- Tejal: Well, let's just hope all this info didn't leave you with a bad taste in your mouth.
- Jesal: [Laughter] Bad joke.
- Tejal: Let's wrap this episode with first a quote from Brenna O'Malley of "The Wellful," and, of course, our tip list. Brenna O'Malley writes, "We can't simultaneously encourage people to eat more fruits and vegetables and whole grains, while also saying 'fruit has too much sugar, avoid the carby vegetables, oh, and cut out all grains.' No wonder everyone's confused and stressed over what to eat."
- Jesal: That quote is just gold. So, let's get into some of our tips, and these are not exhaustive tips because these topics that we've covered are so huge and broad. Please do visit our "Resources" page at the end and do your own research. We'll start with, let's put human beings at the forefront of our conversations around ahimsa. Let's not shame people or stress people out about their bodies and food choices, and instead, let's practice compassion and actual ahimsa in these conversations. And, a call to those in the motherland in India, and to anywhere else that falls into this category, religious fanaticism is not an excuse to murder people. Reriod.
- Jesal: As yoga teachers, we know that we have enough stress when thinking about *when* to eat, let alone *what* to eat, so let's recognize this. Let's recognize that if we're going to talk about non-violence as a framework for diet, that there's actually more than one way that this can play out and that veganism isn't the only way. That actually, historically, there have been many conflicting ideas about how ahimsa dictates what we eat, and that hard and fast food rules encourage obsessive behavior.
- Tejal: Yeah, so maybe thinking more along the lines of flexitarianism, rather than one prescribed set of rules; less about strict guidelines for entire communities of diverse people, more about intuitively understanding and respecting the needs of your own body and its wisdom.
- Jesal: And let's, overall, focus more on human relationships when it comes to ahimsa and allow for yoga spaces to be ones where we learn from each other, validate each other's experiences, and work on healing human suffering.
- Tejal: That sounds beautiful. How about we stop commenting on people's weight, even their weight loss, or their weight gain -- that may be inadvertently rewarding someone's self-harm. We may even be complimenting them because they got sick and lost or gained weight.

- Jesal: Let's spend time confronting our own weight biases because we all have them. We've provided plenty of resources, like we said, and let's also work to understand what health really means. I've written a few blog posts about it as a starting point and I've talked about frameworks like the Blue Zones, and let me tell you this: health has a lot less to do with food and exercise than you might think.
- Tejal: Let's remove moral judgment from food. So, removing language like "guilty pleasures" and "clean foods." The health value of a food is going to be extremely subjective based on an individual, their cultural and genetic makeup, their lifestyle, the affordability of a particular food, the safety concerns in obtaining that food, and many more factors. So, let's work on eliminating the idea there are good foods and bad foods and that good people are thin and fat people are bad. You wouldn't shame a thin person for, let's say, getting cancer or heart disease, so let's stop shaming everyone else on these issues.
- Jesal: And let's work on recognizing that non-violence and environmental concerns when it comes to food are actually not even mostly about individual choices. As we can see from the almond milk conundrum, industry and government are just willing to swap out one bad practice for another and convince us that we've made the right choice in the process. If we're concerned about these issues, we need to approach them politically and work to change how the global systems operate.
- Tejal: Let's stop using fitness talk in yoga spaces. That means eliminating words like tone, burn, calories, beach body, torch, or any words that focus our attention to our outward appearance, rather than our inward experience. If we want people to have more embodied practices, then we need to foster a loving relationship with our bodies instead of a punishing, demanding, or hateful one. Amber Karnes also has a great list of body positivity, do's and don'ts on her website.
- Jesal: If it feels safe for you, then speak up about the diet talk you're hearing in yoga spaces. This can be individual conversations or it can be emails like the one Tejal sent. It can be sending information to your email list in the form of a newsletter or talking to your fellow staff and teachers. Basically, let's spread information in a way that feels safe.
- Tejal: Consider unfollowing and unsubscribing to social media accounts and real life conversations and even personal relationships that contribute to making you feel like you have to be thin or eat a certain way in order to thrive or participate or be relevant to that relationship.

Jesal: Seek help where you need it. Some of us may have diagnosable eating disorders, but speaking for myself, I didn't realize how ingrained some of these illogical and harmful thought processes were in my world and even in my thinking, and I think more of us can benefit from help than we care to admit. And that help can come in a lot of different forms. It can be reaching out to a therapist or a nutritionist that specializes in dismantling diet culture, or following a body positivity leader, or joining a Facebook group that works on dismantling these stereotypes. So, there's a lot of ways to get help.

Tejal: And it can also start with books, podcasts, and articles. Again, many of which we're going to list on our website, as a starting point. So, what do you think Jesal: did vegans kill yoga?

Jesal: I'm going to say that vegan yoga teachers, like Sharon Gannon, who tell everyone that they need to conform to a specific vegan diet without considering any of the harmful side effects of that message, definitely have a role to play in killing yoga. But it's obviously not just vegans. There are many, much larger problems at play here. I think the biggest thing is shame. Diet shame and diet culture killed yoga. What do you think?

Tejal: Well, we highlighted many of the problem areas that, for me, support this idea that vegans may have killed yoga. Like, celebrities speaking about diet without any education around it, like social media shaming folks through imaging and product pushing, and our own misconceptions around health and wellness that take years to unpack and rewire. But, truly, vegans didn't kill yoga. Unrealistic diet goals, harmful media propaganda, and a pervasive culture of judgment over acceptance killed yoga for me.

Jesal: Now, tell us. What you think: did vegans kill yoga? Hit us up on our Instagram handle at *Yoga is Dead Podcast*, or email us at yogaisdeadpodcast@gmail.com.

Tejal: And as always, please support this work by subscribing and by becoming a patreon. Patreons get exclusive, member-only content like extra videos, live conversations, Yoga is Dead stickers and things. You can sign up for as little as \$2 per month and the benefits build from there. Check out www.patreon.com/yogaisdeadpodcast.

Jesal: Thanks for listening. I'm Jesal.

Tejal: And I'm Tejal.

Jesal: Catch us next time on *Yoga is Dead*.