

## Addendum: Diet or Dogma?

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Examines the effects of dogmatic beliefs about diet on health and well-being.

"Diet or Dogma?" is an impressively honest article recently written by blogger Brandon Gilbert, herbalist and co-owner of [Jing Masters](http://JingMasters.com). This is my follow up and response to the issues addressed in "Diet or Dogma?" To read the article and Brandon's other thoughtful and provocative works, visit his [blog](#).

I used to proudly wear the title vegetarian or vegan like a badge. I, like many others, defined myself in part by my diet. It was part of my identity, what separated me from all of the unsympathetic meat-eaters out there. It was not until I inadvertently submersed myself in the world of raw foods that I realized how dogmatic and impractical adhering to a strictly regimented attitude about diet is.

The more I opened myself up and the more I learned, the more I began to shed my formerly strongly held beliefs and ideals. I began to look at my way of eating not as a diet, but as a lifestyle. In a sense, not only do the foods I eat affect my health and well-being, the belief systems I hold myself to have a very real and lasting affect on my mental, spiritual, social, and physical health. Additionally, I began to realize that clinging so desperately to a belief system with rules and values defined by someone other than me was actually counter productive to creating my own health and vitality. I understood that in order to live the healthiest lifestyle for me, I myself had to learn to define what is best for me.

I am not suggesting that you discard the teachings of those at the forefront of the fields of raw food and health and nutrition. Rather, I am urging you to listen to the information they provide and the advice they give, process it, analyze it, and decide how it can best be utilized in your life. I urge you to listen to the way the experts are presenting the information to you. If they are offering nothing but fear and dogma and prescription, you might want to look elsewhere for advice. Someone who is truly in it for the common good, to educate and inspire, will offer information objectively and honestly without attachment.

This leads me back to the idea of diet and dogma. In my work as a raw chef and wellness coach, I have come across many people who, although well meaning, are preventing themselves from advancing to states of higher health and vibration because of dogmatic beliefs regarding what their diet should be. These people get so wrapped up in what they cannot eat, that they forget to enjoy eating at all. What they eat becomes all about what they read in books and what they hear from gurus rather than what their body needs at that moment in their transition. Granted, there is a huge learning curve when it comes to eating raw, but as a community we need to be encouraging and inspiring to one another rather than perpetuating this cycle of competition and guilt and shame. We need to help one another learn to listen to our bodies and eat what we need, rather than worry about maintaining a certain raw percentage or breaking from our raw diet. Everyone will move at a different pace and 100% raw is not best or even reasonable for some.

There is a lot of confusion surrounding the raw food lifestyle that, in my opinion, comes from the subtle percentage-related raw food competition. Many people feel pressured to be "all raw" or 100% raw before they are ready physically or emotionally. Transitioning from a junk-food vegan diet to raw can be difficult, but transitioning from SAD (Standard American Diet) to raw can be utterly overwhelming to some. Many people get lost in the mix, lose hope, or give up because they have fallen off the wagon. They are discouraged because they are lead to believe that in order to be healthy they have to conform to a 75% or 90% or 100% raw diet. All the while, the stress that these people feel to live up to this standard is flooding their bodies with cortisol and the guilt that they feel over their cooked food "slip-ups" is leaving them unable to feel the joy that eating pure, natural food can bring.

I have heard many ridiculously stringent things from people regarding what is and is not acceptable when it comes to raw foods. Many times, I have heard people say that they cannot or will not drink tea because it is not raw. In order to clear this one up, let me point out that many herbs are much more beneficial when steeped or even decocted or boiled than when raw. You cannot eat dried roots or a tea bag and expect to get much out of either. Herbal teas can be a very important part of a transition diet as they can provide nutritional support and aid in detoxification. They also make an amazing base for superfood smoothies. Just ask raw food guru and nutrition expert David Wolfe! He does not shy from making hot teas just because they are "not raw."

Another shockingly ridiculous idea that I have come across is that you can never have warm soups. I have talked to many people who felt that, due to the discouragement of others, they were faltering on their raw journey because they had eaten some warmed soup. Some simply gave up on eating raw as they could not stay warm in the winter. They had been led to believe that eating a strict raw food diet was more important than their comfort, happiness, or peace of mind.

I believe that we, as a community, need to be more mindful of accepting everyone, regardless of where they are in their journey. No matter how far each of us has come, there is always more work to be done. Clinging to a title and pushing it in others' faces does less to improve one's health than learning acceptance and appreciation. I am not saying this to down anyone. Rather, I am speaking from experience. Often times, we mean well, but are misinformed. Yet, due to dogmatic belief systems, we refuse to allow ourselves to partake in something which may actually be of benefit. For many years, I refused to eat honey and I discouraged everyone I knew from doing so. This was truly out of the goodness of my heart because I was worried about the bees. Honey bees are disappearing from many parts of the country due to pesticides, disease, and the gassing of bees by inhumane companies that seek to profit from stealing their honey. It was also partly because I considered myself vegan, and was proud that I did not consume any animal (or insect) products. Little did I know that I could get delicious local raw honey from beekeepers who love and care for their bees. Little did I know that by consuming local honey I was contributing to the local ecosystem by supporting the pollination of plants. By consuming local, raw honey, now one of my favorite foods, I was also inoculating myself against pollen, the very thing which caused me the most seasonal allergies. Looking back, I realize how silly it was that I let someone else define for me what it meant to be vegan, or that I was even concerned with a title.

Titles are like clothing. We wear them not only to protect ourselves physically and emotionally, but also to dress ourselves up - to make us look more impressive to others. If we are constantly concerning ourselves with what we are wearing, rather than what we truly are on the inside, then it will be difficult to move toward healthier and happier states of being. But if we can begin to love ourselves for who we are, if we can begin to move past the need to define ourselves by arbitrary titles like vegetarian, vegan, raw foodist, Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, American, "foreign," black, white, and begin to see ourselves as human, we will inevitably be more happy, open, and accepting of peace, love, and radiant health.

Erin Brennan is a Raw Foods Chef and the owner of Living Bliss, a company based out of Louisville, Kentucky which provides fresh and delicious raw and living whole foods. Erin is passionate about teaching and practicing yoga, holistic health, herbs, healing arts, spending time in nature, and creating beautiful art.

<http://www.livingblissfoods.com> <http://erinbrennan.blogspot.com>

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Author: Erin Brennan

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