

[Ahimsa: To Do No Harm](#)

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WHAT IS HINDUISM?

## Ahimsa: To Do No Harm

We Can Change the Way Mankind Behaves by Practicing Nonviolence

BY SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIASWAMI

Hindu wisdom, which inspires humans to live the ideals of compassion and nonviolence, is captured in one word, ahimsa. In Sanskrit himsa is doing harm or causing injury. The "a" placed before the word negates it. Very simply, ahimsa is abstaining from causing harm or injury. It is gentleness and noninjury, whether physical, mental or emotional. It is good to know that nonviolence speaks only to the most extreme forms of forceful wrongdoing, while ahimsa goes much deeper to prohibit even the subtle abuse and the simple hurt.

Devout Hindus oppose killing for several reasons. Belief in karma and reincarnation are strong forces at work in the Hindu mind. They full well know that any thought,

feeling or action sent out from themselves to another will return to them through yet another in equal or amplified intensity. What we have done to others will be done to us, if not in this life then in another. The Hindu is thoroughly convinced that violence which he commits will return to him by a cosmic process that is unerring. Two thousand years ago South India's weaver saint Tiruvalluvar said it so simply, "All suffering recoils on the wrongdoer himself. Thus, those desiring not to suffer refrain from causing others pain" (Tirukural 320). A similar view can be found in the Jain Acharanga Sutra: "To do harm to others is to do harm to oneself. You are he whom you intend to kill. You are he whom you intend to dominate. We corrupt ourselves as soon as we intend to corrupt others. We kill ourselves as soon as we intend to kill others."

Many today are wondering how we might move from violence to nonviolence, how mankind might transform itself from approval of killing to opposition to it. The Hindu knows that at this time on this planet those of the lower nature, unevolved people, are society's antagonists. Being unevolved, they are of the lower nature, instinctive, self-assertive, confused, possessive and protective of their immediate environment. Others are their enemies. They are jealous, angry, fearful. Many take sport in killing for the sake of killing, thieving for the sake of theft, even if they do not need or use the spoils. This is the lower nature, and it is equally

distributed among the peoples of the world, in every nation, society and neighborhood. Those of the higher nature ten, fifteen or twenty percent of the population live in protective environments. Their occupation is research, memory, education, which is reason; moving the world's goods here and there, which is will. Those of yet an even higher nature delve into the mysteries of the universe, and others work for universal peace and love on Earth, as groups and individuals. The Hindu knows that those of the lower nature will slowly, eventually, over an experiential period of time, come into the higher nature, and that those of the higher nature, who have worked so hard to get there, will avoid the lower nature and not allow themselves to be caught up in it again. Hindus believe in the progress of humanity, from an old age into a new age, from darkness into a consciousness of divine light.

Nonviolence has long been central to the religious traditions of India especially Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Religion in India has consistently upheld the sanctity of life, whether human, animal or, in the case of the Jains, elemental. There developed early in India an unparalleled concern for harmony among different life forms, and this led to a common ethos based on noninjuriousness and a minimal consumption of natural resources, in other words, to compassion and simplicity. If Homo sapiens is to survive his present predicament, he will have to rediscover these two primary ethical

virtues.

In order to understand the pervasive practice of nonviolence in Hinduism, one must investigate the meaning of life. Why is life sacred? For India's ancient thinkers, life is seen as the very stuff of the Divine, an emanation of the Source and part of a cosmic continuum. The nature of this continuum varies in Hindu thought. Some hold that the individual evolves up through life forms, taking more and more advanced incarnations which culminate in human life. Others believe that according to one's karma and samskaras, the process can even be reversed, that is, one can achieve a "lower" birth. Even those Indians who do not believe in reincarnation of an individual still hold that all that exists abides in the Divine. They further hold that each life form even water and trees possesses consciousness and energy. Whether the belief is that the life force of animals can evolve into human status, or that the opposite can also take place, or simply that all things enjoy their own consciousness, the result is the same a reverence for life.

Not all of Earth's one billion Hindus are living in a perfect state of ahimsa all of the time. Sometimes conditions at hand may force a situation, a regrettable exception, where violence or killing seems to be necessary. Hindus, like other human beings,

unfortunately do kill people. In self-defense or in order to protect his family or his village, the Hindu may have to hurt an intruder. Even then he would harbor no hatred in his heart. Hindus should never instigate an intrusion or instigate a death; nor seek revenge, nor plot retaliation for injuries received. They have their courts of justice, punishment for crimes and agencies for defending against the aggressor or the intruder. Before any personal use of force, so to speak, all other avenues of persuasion and intelligence would be looked into, as Hindus believe that intelligence is their best weapon. In following dharma, the only rigid rule is wisdom. My satguru, Siva Yogaswami, said, "It is a sin to kill the tiger in the jungle. But if he comes into the village, it may become your duty." A devout Hindu would give warnings to scare the tiger or would try to capture the tiger without injury. Probably it would be the most unreligious person in the village who would come forward to

kill the tiger.

Many groups on the planet today advocate killing and violence and war for a righteous cause. They not agree with the idea that violence, himsa, is necessarily of the lower nature. But a righteous cause is only a matter of opinion, and going to war affects the lives of a great many innocent people. It's a big karmic responsibility. Combat through war, righteous or not, is lower consciousness. Religious values are left aside, to be picked up and continued when the war is over, or in the next life or the one after that. It is said that in ancient

India meat would be fed to the soldiers during military campaigns, especially before combat, to bring them into lower consciousness so that they would forget their religious values. Most higher consciousness people will not fight even if their lives depend on it. They are conscientious objectors, and there have been many in every country who have been imprisoned or killed because they would not take up arms against their brother and sister humans. This is the strictest expression of Hinduism's law of ahimsa.

One of the most famous of Hindu

writings, the Bhagavad Gita, is often taken as Divine sanction for violence. It basically says that for the kshatriya, or soldier, war is dharma. Lord Krishna orders Arjuna to fight and do his kshatriya dharma in spite of his doubts and fears that what he is about to do is wrong, despite his dread of killing his own kinsmen. Hindus for a long time have taken this text as justification for war and conflicts of all kinds, including street riots and anarchy. But all that aside, no matter how it is interpreted, let us not be mistaken that the Bhagavad Gita gives permission for violence. The Mahabharata (of which the Gita is a part) itself says, "Ahimsa is the



highest dharma. It is the highest purification. It is also the highest truth from which all dharma proceeds" (18.1125.25). An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is definitely not a part of true Hindu doctrine.

In every country there is the army, the navy, air force, police, the protectors of the country the collective force of citizens that keep a country a country. This is dharma. In protection of family and nation, in armies and police forces which give security, it is indeed dharmic for kshatriyas to do their lawful duty, to use necessary force, even

lethal force. But for this collective force of protectors, of peacemakers, of peacekeepers which includes the law courts and the central administrative authorities who oversee the courts, the armies, the navies, the air force would the priests be able to function? Would the businessmen be able to acquire and sell their goods? Would the farmers be able to plant their crops and harvest them? Could the children play fearlessly in the streets and countryside? No. The answer is obvious.

Those who take law into their own

hands in the name of dharma, citing their case upon the Mahabharata, are none but the lawbreakers, anarchists, the arsonists, the terrorists. The Mahabharata gives no permission for anarchy. The Mahabharata gives no permission for terrorism. The Mahabharata gives no permission for looting and diluting the morals of society through prostitution, running drugs and the selling and buying of illegal arms. The Pandavas, the heroes of this ancient epic, were not rabble rousers. They were not inciting riots. Nor were they participating in extortion to run their war. Nor were they participating in the sale of

drugs to finance their war. Nor were they participating in prostitution to win their war. Nor were they participating in enlisting women to help them fight their war. Nor were they having children learn to snare their victims.

Yes, dharma does extend to protecting one's country. But does it extend to taking a country from another, or to stealing lands? That is lawlessness, blatant lawlessness. In the modern age, to create a nation or even a business enterprise upon the death of

another, upon lands confiscated, stolen, illegally acquired, usurped from another's realm, is definitely not Hindu dharma, and this is not Mahabharata.

In Gandhian philosophy ahimsa means nonviolent action which leads to passive resistance in order to put a point across. Basically, he taught, don't hit your opponent over the head. If he tells you to do something, stall and don't obey and don't do it and frustrate him into submission. And yet he was not a pacifist prepared to accept any

harm without resistance. When a gang of tribals came in and raped the women in a village, Gandhi said there should not have been a man left alive in the village. They should have stood up for the village and protected it with their lives.

So, to me, if an intruder breaks into your house to rape the women or steal things, you have the right, even the duty, to defend your own, but you don't have the right to torture him. Ahimsa needs to be properly understood, in moderation. To

explain nonviolence, you have to explain what violence is, as opposed to protecting yourself. Is it violent to own a dog who would put his teeth to the throat of a vicious intruder? I don't think it is. If nonviolence is to be something that the world is going to respect, we have to define it clearly and make it meaningful.

Achieving a nonviolent world would simply mean that all individuals have to somehow or other reconcile their

differences enough that the stress those differences produce can no longer take over their mind, body and emotions, causing them to perform injurious acts. Again, this would begin in the home. Peaceful homes breed gentle people. Gentle people follow ahimsa.

What's the best way to teach peace to the world? The best way is to first teach families to be peaceful within their own



home, to settle all arguments and contention before they sleep at night, even if they stay up for three days, so the children can see that peace can be attained and then maintained through the use of intelligence. Humans do not have horns or claws; nor do they have sharp teeth. Their weapon is their intelligence. Children must be taught through the example of parents and by learning the undeniable facts of life, the basic tenets that an all-pervasive force holds this

universe together, that we create with this force every minute, every hour, every day, and because time is a cycle, what we create comes back to us. Therefore, because we create in a physical universe while in a physical body, we must return to a physical body, in a new life after death, to face up to our creations, good, bad or mixed. Once they learn this, they are winners. It is up to the parents to create the peacemakers of the future. It is always up to the parents. And remember, we teach children

in only one way by our own example.

Parents must teach children to appreciate those who are different, those who believe differently; teach them the openness that they need to live in a pluralistic world where others have their unique ways, their life and culture; teach them the value of human diversity and the narrow-mindedness of a provincial outlook; give them

the tools to live in a world of differences without feeling threatened, without forcing their ways or their will on others; teach them that it never helps to hurt another of our brothers or sisters.

Vegetarianism is a natural and obvious way to live with a minimum of hurt to other beings. Hindu scripture speaks clearly and forcefully on vegetarianism. The Yajur Veda dictates: "Do not injure the

beings living on the Earth, in the air and in the water." The beautiful Tirukural, a widely-read 2,200-year-old masterpiece of ethics, speaks of conscience: "When a man realizes that meat is the butchered flesh of another creature, he will abstain from eating it" (257). The Manu Samhita advises: "Having well considered the origin of flesh and the cruelty of fettering and slaying corporeal beings, let one entirely abstain from eating flesh," and "When the diet is pure, the mind and

heart are pure." In the yoga-infused verses of the Tirumantiram warning is given of how meat-eating holds the mind in gross, adharmic states: "The ignoble ones who eat flesh, death's agents bind them fast and push them quick into the fiery jaws of the lower worlds" (199).

Vegetarianism is very important. In my fifty years of ministry, it has become quite evident that vegetarian

families have far fewer problems than those who are not vegetarian. The abhorrence of killing of any kind leads quite naturally to a vegetarian diet. If you think about it, the meat-eater is participating indirectly in a violent act against the animal kingdom. His desire for meat drives another man to kill and provide that meat. The act of the butcher begins with the desire of the consumer. When his consciousness lifts and expands, he will abhor violence and not be able to even digest

the meat, fish and eggs he was formerly consuming. India's greatest saints have confirmed that one cannot eat meat and live a peaceful, harmonious life. Man's appetite for meat inflicts devastating harm on the Earth itself, stripping its precious forests to make way for pastures. The opposite of causing injury to others is compassion and love for all beings. The Tirukural puts it nicely: "How can he practice true compassion who eats the flesh of an animal to fatten his own flesh"(251).



If children are raised as vegetarians, every day they are exposed to noninjury as a principle of peace and compassion. Every day as they are growing up, they are remembering and being reminded to not kill. They won't even kill another creature to feed themselves. And if you won't kill another creature to feed yourself, then when you grow up you will be much less likely to injure people.

Excerpted from Satguru Sivaya  
Subramuniaswami's book,  
Living with Siva.

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# Taking Care of Business - Nonviolently

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Ahimsa is not just a  
prohibition against  
physical and emotional

# assault

BY SATGURU SIVAYA  
SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI

I was once asked for my insights on applying ahimsa in the business world. Ahimsa in business is taught in a

reverse way on  
American television:  
Titans, The West Wing,  
Dynasty, Falcon Crest,  
Dallas, Sopranos popular  
shows of our time. Their  
scriptwriters promoted  
himsa, injuriousness, in  
business "Save the  
Falcon Crest farm at any  
cost, save South Fork,  
save the corporation."  
Now the national news

media reports attempts to save Microsoft, save the tobacco industry, save the hand gun manufacturers. The fight is on, and real-life court battles have taken the place of TV sitcoms which have long since been off the air. In both the TV and the real-life conflicts, whatever you do to your competitor is

OK because it's only business. The plots weave in and out, with one scene of mental and emotional cruelty after another. The Hindu business ethic is very clear. As the weaver Tiruvalluvar said, "Those businessmen will prosper whose business protects as their own the interests of others" (

Tirukural 120). We should compete by having a better product and better methodologies of promoting and selling it, not by destroying our competitor's product and reputation. Character assassination is not part of ahimsa. It reaps bad benefits to the accusers. That is practiced by



many today, even by Hindus who are off track in their perceptions of ahimsa. Hindus worldwide must know that American television is not the way business should be practiced. As some people teach you what you should do and other people teach you what you should not do, the popular television

programs mentioned above clearly teach us what we should not do. The principles of ahimsa and other ethical teachings within Hinduism show us a better way.

Many corporations today are large, in fact larger than many small

countries. Their management is like the deceptive, dishonest, deceitful, arrogant, domineering autocrat, king, or like the benevolent religious monarch, all depending on whether there are people of lower consciousness or higher consciousness in charge. Cities, districts,

provinces, counties, states and central governments all have many laws for ethical business practices, and none of those laws permits unfair trade, product assassination or inter-business competitive fights to the death. Each business is dharmically bound to serve the community,

not take from the community like a vulture. When the stewardships of large corporations follow the law of the land and the principles of ahimsa, they put their energies into developing better products and better community service. When the leadership has a mind for corporate

espionage, its energies are diverted, the products suffer and so does customer relations. The immediate profits in the short term might be gratifying, but in the long run, profits gained from wrong-doings are generally spent on wrong-doings.

Ahimsa always has the same consequences. And we know these benefits well. Himsa always has the same consequences, too. It develops enemies, creates unseemly karmas which will surely return and affect the destiny of the future of the business enterprise. The perfect timing

needed for success is defeated by inner reactions to the wrong-doings. A business enterprise which bases its strategies on hurtfulness cannot in good judgment hire employees who are in higher consciousness, lest they object to these tactics. Therefore, they attract employees who



are of the same caliber as themselves, and they all practice himsa among one another. Trickery, deceitfulness and deception are of the lower nature, products of the methodology of performing himsa, hurtfulness, mentally and emotionally. The profits derived from himsa policies are

short-term and ill-spent.  
The profits derived from  
ahimsa policies are  
long-term and well  
spent.

Saints and Scriptures  
Speak on Ahimsa

# Ancient and modern voices extol the virtues of noninjuriousness

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Nonviolence,  
truthfulness,  
nonstealing, purity,  
sense control—this,  
in brief, says Manu,  
is the dharma of all  
the four castes.

Dharma Shastras 10

You do not like to suffer yourself. How can you inflict suffering on others? Every killing is a suicide. The eternal,

blissful and natural state has been smothered by this life of ignorance. In this way the present life is due to the killing of the eternal, pristine Being. Is it not a case of suicide?

# Ramana Maharishi

One should never do  
that to another

which one regards as injurious to one's own self. This, in brief, is the rule of dharma. Yielding to desire and acting differently, one becomes guilty of adharma.



# Mahabharata

## 18:113.8

To be free from  
violence is the duty  
of every man. No

thought of revenge,  
hatred or ill will  
should arise in our  
minds. Injuring  
others gives rise to  
hatred.

Swami Sivananda

If a man inflicts  
sorrow on another in  
the morning, sorrow  
will come to him  
unbidden in the  
afternoon.

Tirukural 319

Refrain from killing knowingly even the trifling insects like a louse, a bug or a mosquito. Use no violence even to

gain possession of a woman, wealth or kingdom. Never kill any animals even for the purpose of sacrifice.

Non-violence is the greatest of all religions.

# Swami Sahajanand

Ahimsa is the  
highest dharma.  
Ahimsa is the best  
tapas. Ahimsa is the

greatest gift. Ahimsa  
is the highest  
self-control. Ahimsa  
is the highest  
sacrifice. Ahimsa is  
the highest power.  
Ahimsa is the  
highest friend.  
Ahimsa is the  
highest truth.  
Ahimsa is the

highest teaching.

Mahabharata  
18:116.37-41

By ahimsa Patanjali  
meant the removal  
of the desire to kill.



All forms of life have an equal right to the air of maya. All men may understand this truth by overcoming the passion for destruction.

Sri Yukteswar

Ahimsa is not  
causing pain to any  
living being at any  
time through the  
actions of one's  
mind, speech or

body.

# Sandilya Upanishad

Those high-souled persons who desire beauty, faultlessness of limbs, long life, understanding, mental and physical strength and memory should abstain from acts of injury.

# Mahabharata 18:115.8

When one is

established in  
non-injury, beings  
give up their mutual  
animosity in his  
presence.

Yoga Sutras

The Hindu sage sees the whole of life. If he does not fight, it is not because he rejects all fighting as futile, but because he has finished his fights. He has overcome all

dissensions between  
himself and the  
world and is now at  
rest.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan

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# SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

## Harnessing Speech

Inner  
contemplation and  
outer  
disciplineinsure  
ahimsa in your  
daily interactions

**BY**  
**BRAHMACHARINI**  
**MAYA TIWARI**

**The human voice**

as a divine  
instrument is a  
power-ful,  
foundational tool  
for living a life of  
ahimsa. It is the  
basis of our  
individuality and  
creative  
expression.

However, the human voice is our most misunderstood and misused possession. We take our voice for granted using and abusing it for the most mundane,

trivial and hurtful  
communications  
forgetting to  
honor it as the  
divine instrument  
of ahimsa within  
us.

The seers  
emulated the  
primordial sound  
in order to fashion  
the first human  
expression, called  
sruti, the cosmic  
revelation as  
heard by the  
rishis. Sruti is also

referred to as the  
Word, and the  
song of Sama  
Veda informs us  
that, "Verily, if  
there were no  
Word, there would  
be no knowledge  
neither of right or  
wrong, nor of



truth and untruth,  
nor of the pleasing  
and unpleasing.  
The Word makes  
all this known."  
This original Word  
informed Vedic  
ritual speech,  
mantras, chants  
and music, which

carry the cosmic rhythms and memory of the universe's entire experience. The rishis declared the spoken word, sruti, as their most significant contribution to

humanity. Most ancient people left their imprint on history through the medium of precious materials gold, silver, bronze, onyx and granite. While time has eroded

these monuments,  
the Vedic  
tradition's rich  
legacy of the  
spoken word,  
recited daily by an  
unbroken chain of  
generations, still  
lives on.

Most of us are  
conscious of the  
foods we eat, the  
air we breathe,  
the postures we  
emulate and other  
spiritual practices  
we do to bring

good health, yet we are unaware of the negative impressions we imbibe by way of our senses from unwholesome talk, chaotic interaction and the barrage of discordant sounds

we take into our  
personal lives  
through television  
and other media.  
A mind that is  
bombarded with  
violent  
impressions will  
become  
desensitized and

express itself in  
angry and  
insensitive ways.  
Eric's story is a  
classical  
illustration of  
exactly this  
challenge.



I met Eric several years ago at a meditation workshop in New York. He was seventeen years old and had been recently expelled from school for verbally abusing

his teacher. Eric's mother, Marion, was a prominent yoga teacher. She confided to me that Eric had been a quiet boy and an excellent student until he fell in with a "bad crowd" in

the neighborhood.

After listening to Marion, I asked to speak with Eric privately. As he slouched in the

chair beside me,  
he refused to  
make eye contact.  
I closed my eyes  
and waited for him  
to speak. After  
several tense  
minutes, he broke  
the silence. "She  
is always

screaming at me,  
demanding that I  
do the things that  
make her happy.  
But what about  
me? She is so  
caught up in her  
work she doesn't  
even know who I  
am. She pushes

me to do all these health things. My friends think I'm a sissy eating health food, washing the dishes, chanting...." For twenty minutes, or so, Eric blurted out his story

non-stop. All I  
could hear was  
the young man's  
anger about being  
pushed by  
Marion's anger  
and his frustration  
about feeling  
inadequate and  
not "fitting in"

with his friends.  
Marion had good intentions for her son, but like many parents who underestimate their children's intelligence she had missed the most important



lesson listening to  
her son's needs  
and  
communicating  
with him. The  
more she forced  
Eric to adhere to  
her values, the  
farther away Eric  
ran. Suddenly, as

he became a teenager, he found a voice of violence in the popular culture that had heard him and he began to retaliate against his mother's tyranny.

To compensate for the support he felt he was not getting at home, Eric had found negative reinforcement from his street buddies and seized the opportunity to

express himself.  
He was true to his  
voice of anger. It  
was Marion who  
had not yet found  
her voice of  
peace. Although  
she had been  
practicing yoga for  
twelve years, she

has still not found  
the true meaning  
behind spiritual  
practice the spirit  
of nonviolence  
and nonhurting  
that would finally  
help her to  
communicate its  
wondrous essence

to her son.

I have developed  
the Vac Tapasya,  
"Speech  
Penance," to  
evoke healthy,  
harmonious

thoughts and  
bring forward  
positive, pleasant  
words. Spend  
fifteen minutes at  
the end of every  
day allowing your  
mind to run free.  
Notice whatever  
negative, hurtful

thoughts that may  
come up. Write  
down those  
thoughts and the  
person or  
situations they  
concern, without  
whitewashing or  
censoring them.  
Let yourself be



angry, judgmental  
and unkind. And  
above all, be  
honest. Repeat  
each negative  
thought aloud. For  
example: "Mary is  
so demanding. I  
can't bear to work  
with her." Then

recite the attitude  
of one seeking  
true inner  
knowledge: "I  
know that every  
negative thought  
reflects my own  
inner condition."

Now take  
responsibility for  
your feelings from  
which the  
negative thought  
sprang: "I am  
being intolerant of  
Mary. It will not be  
pleasant for Mary  
if I see her with

this attitude." This will help you learn to always carefully consider your words before you speak them aloud to another person, and to avoid an angry, accusatory or aggressive

tone. If you feel pressured to respond or speak in a way that you think may be hurtful to another person, use your notebook to tell this person your raw, unedited

feelings in the form of a letter that you do not send. Let the letter sit for a week. Then, before you read it, make one small change. Replace the name of the

person to whom it is addressed with your own name. This may help you understand that the letter has less to do with the person with whom you are angry, and is more about

your hurt feelings,  
which stem from  
your negative  
thoughts and  
feelings about  
your own life. The  
Maitri Upanishad  
put it this way:  
"Words cannot  
describe the joy of



the spirit whose  
spirit is cleansed  
in deep  
contemplation  
who is one with  
his/her own Spirit.  
Only those who  
experience this  
joy knows what it  
is."

Bri. Maya Tiwari is  
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