**Ahimsa: To Do No Harm**

Exploring the Cardinal Virtue of Noninjury in Thought, Word & Deed

**BY SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI**

In Hindu wisdom, which inspires humans to live the ideals of compassion and nonviolence, is captured in one word, _ahimsa_. In Sanskrit, _ahimsa_ 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 applies 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 fully know that any thought, feeling or action sent out from themself 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 30). 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 an awareness 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—those of the upper nature—seek to understand one another, to reach a common understanding. They seek to know the other. Those of the higher nature seek to understand the noninjury of the universe, and others seek 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 exponential 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. Hinduism 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 Indians 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—every water and tree—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 for a righteous cause. They do 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 behind 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 conscious-
ness people will not fight even if their lives depend on it. They are 
conscientious objects, 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 Hindu writings, the Bhagavad Gita, is 
often taken as divinely sanctioned for nonviolence in management in 
says that for 

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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 ideals 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 harm to other beings. A speech is clearly powerfully and forcefully on vegetarianism. The Yajur Veda dictates: “Do not injure the living being on the Earth, in the air and in the water.” The beautiful Trisukh, a widely-read 2000-year-old masterpiece of ethics, speaks of conscience: “When a man realizes that meat is the butchered flesh of another being, he will abstain from eating it” (237). The Manus Smriti advises: “Having well considered the origin of flesh and the cruelty of slaying corporeal beings, let one entirely abstain from eating flesh”. And “When the diet is pure, the mind and heart are pure.” In a yogic-visioned verse of the Trisukhwarnan warning is given of how meat-eating holds one entirely to noninjury as a principle of peace and compassion. Every day as you are growing up, you are remembering and being reminded not to 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 less likely to injure people.

Saints and Scriptures Speak on Ahimsa

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 ahimsa.

Asma Mahatparat

Ahimsa is the highest dharma. Ahimsa is the highest good. Ahimsa is the highest power. Asata for his highest friend. Ahimsa is the highest truth. Ahimsa is the highest teaching.

By ahimsa Patanjali meant the removal of the desire to kill. All forms of life have an equal right to live, even in its possession of a woman, wealth or kingdom. Never kill any animals even for the powerful motive of sacrifice. Nonviolence is the greatest of all religious.

Swami Sahajananand

Ahimsa is not causing pain to any living being in any way, even in pain, possession of a woman, wealth or kingdom. Never kill any animals even for the powerful motive of sacrifice. Nonviolence is the greatest of all religious.

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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 18:118-37-41

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 Steemananda

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

Trisukh 319

Refrair from killing knowingly even the trifling insects like a louse, a bug or a mosquito. Use no violence, even in pain, possession of a woman, wealth or kingdom. Never kill any animals even for the powerful motive of sacrifice. Nonviolence is the greatest of all religions.

Swami Sahajananand

The voice of ahimsa: Thinking before speaking

To avoid an angry, accusatory or aggressive tone. If you feel pressured to respond or speak in a way that you think may be harmful to another person, use your imagination and go back to the principle of the unfiltered, unfeigned speech. A mind that is bombarded with violent impressions will become desensitized and express itself in angry and insensitive ways. Erich’s story is a classical illustration of exactly this challenge.

I met Eric several years ago at a meditation workshop in New York. Eric was a gifted young man who had 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 bright and promising student until he fell ill with a “bad cold” in the neighborhood.

After listening to Marion, I asked to speak with Eric privately. As soon as I reached the classroom door, he refused to make eye contact. I closed my eyes and waited for him to speak. After several silent minutes, he spoke hesitantly. “My mom always seems to talk about losing my 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.”

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