

Ahimsa – The Practice of Non-violence

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Definition of Ahimsa/Non-violence.

Not to hurt or to make any harm to anybody physically, mentally or by language – not to cause any pain or injury to any other being in any possible way. This is the actual meaning of *ahimsa* or non-violence.

Nowadays people use this non-violence theory mostly as a technique to solve conflicts without the use of force or violence. But the actual meaning of *ahimsa* is used in a much wider sense than only the absence of violence or force, because *ahimsa* is not only a theory or technique – it is one of the major ethical principles of human life.

One great Indian prophet in the fifteenth century (Sri Chaitanya) has explained this in his message: “*Trinadapi sunichena Taruriba sahisnuna, Amaninamanadena kirtania sada Hari*” – “We have to be more humble than grass and more patient than trees, we have to give respect to each and every living being and we always have to remember God.” These are the supreme qualities of human nature. The one who has all these qualities will be able to attain the principle of absolute non-violence.

Lord Krishna in the Bhagavadgita says: “*Nirbairaha sarvavuteshu jaha saha mameti Pandaba*” – “The one who is free from enmity, hostility, jealousy, envy, spite or malice to every living being on the earth, can realise Me (God).” Anyone who is free from all these vices which comes from ignorance, he or she is by nature non-violent.

One of the great ideals of *Sanatana Dharma* (*Sanatana Dharma* existed in the Vedic period before all the religions started. It is the origin of all religions) is: “*Bashudhayba Cutumbakam*” – “You should cultivate the feeling that everybody in the world belongs to one family.” In this sense we are relatives with each other. It is the ideal way to build a society without violence.

Ahimsa is the base of Indian philosophy. According to Buddha and Jaina philosophy *ahimsa* is the noblest *dharma* (every thing in creation is held, nurtured and preserved by a principle that is called *dharma*) of mankind. The whole basis of *dharma* is *ahimsa*.

“*Ahimsa* or non-injury of life is the transcendental truth of religion”, says Sri Ananda Acharya. Therefore the three Indian religions Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism are based on these well known Vedic words: “*Ma Himsi Sarve Vutanam*” - “Thou shalt not injure any living being.”

In the *Ashtangayoga* of Patanjali *ahimsa* is the first step. Now we can understand that *ahimsa* is *yoga sadhana* in our spiritual life. According to *Vedanta* basically there is no duality in creation. As long as man is obsessed with his ego there is duality and delusion. We see everywhere only name and form. It is called individual soul or self, and that is ignorance. In *Vedanta* it is called *maya*. As long as we have ignorance, this duality exists, but by the light of wisdom ignorance disappears, and then we are able to realise that. Everything is the manifestation of the Divine Self. Whatever we see is a projection of Self, which is a formless entity. In *Vedanta* the universal, Divine Self, is called *Brahman*. Actually the Entity lies beyond both attribute and attributeless states. This formless Entity assumes a form in Divine Love. The formless resides in the form and form resides in the formless. These two concepts are always simultaneous and interrelated. When we have this knowledge of Oneness, hostility or enmity, jealousy, violence, etc., cannot find a place in our mind. Because the mind is filled by wisdom, love, compassion and patience. Then we don't have any reluctance or enmity anymore. We have become non-violent by nature.

Ahimsa is the expression of divine love and compassion. We have seen that there are jealousy, hostility, and enmity between brothers and sisters or other members of the same family. It is because of lack of love, and it is the source of violence. Love cannot blossom as long as these tendencies are present. All these are born of ignorance. In divine love there is a feeling of oneness with the world. It is perceived in the non-dual existence. It cannot be expressed in words. Divine love means infinite compassion for all living beings. It is the transcendence from darkness to light.

Swami Vivekananda said: “Where are you looking for God? God is everywhere in front of you in different appearances, who are all these living beings on the earth. He who loves them, he loves God”. Who is God? In the words of my master Swami Paramananda: “God is the concentrated love, and life is the living idol of God.” Sri Ananda Acharya says: The ways of love or the attainment of emancipation – all grows from one beautiful root of healing that is absence of injury (*ahimsa*)." Therefore as long we are violent in nature we cannot get real freedom (*mukti*).

Ahimsa is the manifestation of humanity. Basically human life consists of three *gunas* or attributes: *Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* (spiritual, ideal and material). *Sattvaguna* nature is kindness, forgiveness, humbleness, patience, feeling of equality, feeling of unity, etc. All these good qualities are the basic principles of humanity. And all these are expressed through *ahimsa* or non-violent nature. Therefore *ahimsa* is the *mantra* (an audible sound which has a vibration that can be related to consciousness) of all great prophets.

Ahimsa is the source of real happiness. In the words of my master Swami Paramananda: "There is a tendency of life to conquer each other, but we do not know **how** to conquer. We shall learn to conquer each other not by violence, but by wisdom, love and compassion." And by this we shall get real happiness in life.

Why are we violent?

There are many causes why people can be violent. One can be violent by nature from childhood. It happens because each person has his or her own inherent tendencies which we in India call *samskaras* (impressions). These are coming from previous lives or from the parents' nature. It can also happen that if one has negative experiences in childhood (negligence, lack of love, hard domination, etc.), in adolescence or as a grown-up one can be influenced by one's past experiences and become perverted, which makes him or her aggressive and violent.

As long as we are in the darkness of ignorance, we don't have any realisation of divine knowledge (the knowledge of Oneness), but have instead a strong ego. Therefore we always make a distinction between each and every individual name and form. This difference always makes the distinction of superior and inferior, and this kind of distinction always goes on in society. It is because of this that the superior always tries to dominate and exploit the inferior, and this is usually done by violence. The inferior also don't get any respect or human rights from the superior. It is often seen that lower classes are brutally tortured by socially higher classes, and that makes the lower classes aggressive and violent against the superior classes. We can find this kind of example in the history of the French Revolution.

As an individual soul we have endless desires. When one of them is fulfilled we get satisfaction only for a moment. But we have always many, many projections (projects) and therefore we continuously get new desires. In this way we can be more and more greedy to get name, fame, riches, power and all these kinds of worldly happiness. On the other hand, if our desire is not fulfilled, we become dissatisfied and become crazy to fulfil our desires. And this makes us aggressive and violent.

Ignorance and dualistic feeling makes us also selfish. We think only "myself" – to do everything for my own happiness. But we are living in society together with many others, and therefore our self-interest can be hampered by the common interest. A selfish mind cannot feel the interest of others, and that makes us angry and violent. When man is guided by his own selfish motives, he becomes dogmatic. Dogmatism robs him of his inherent naturalness and perverts his attitude, because dogma lies at the root of all disputes. They are responsible for all conflicts, crises and confusions of life. A nationwide revolution or movement is based on dogma, and conflicts start against an established dogma. Once one is defeated, a new one appears, and this always happens through violence.

Man is a prisoner of superstitions and rituals, and it makes him confused. By confusion man loses sight of his end and becomes obsessed with his means. It cultivates groups, communities, classes, sects, etc., and then it is easy to start conflict between groups or sects, as often happens between different religious sects or communities. Because each one tries to establish its own authenticity and superstition, therefore they are continuously involving themselves in arguments and disputes which can easily make conflict. We have many examples in history where these kinds of religious or communal conflicts turn into bloody wars.

Racism is also a root of violence. It is common that the different human races hate each other and wage war against each other, because this kind of community sentiment brings narrow-mindedness. One cannot tolerate others and is always engaged in finding fault with others. Hate always leads to revenge which is a key to violence. Fear and insecurity make people weak, but we don't know how to get security and take the path of non-violence.

If we look back through every reason which makes us violent, we see that the reasons can be divided into three main groups: Ignorance, lack of love/lack of spiritual perception, and perversion.

How to remove violence?

To remove ignorance and awaken conscience.

This principle is applied for the creation, preservation and destruction in the animate world where man is the highest manifestation. It is only the human being who has conscience, and we cannot find it in any other living being. Everybody has an understanding of what is right and what is wrong, and therefore we have feelings of guilt. But it sometimes happens that we forget our real identity that we are human beings. We should follow all the qualities of the conscientious being. By ignorance we think or we do many unfortunate acts by which we cannot be recognized as a human being. Therefore, to prove our identity, we have to overcome our tendency to ignore our own reality and awaken our conscience in the light of consciousness. All sentient beings and all inorganic life are the projection of consciousness, and consciousness is present in all that exists.

To overcome ego and selfishness.

As a conscious human being we have a feeling of what should be the path of non-violence.

First we have to forget our selfishness and not be engaged with our self-interest. Because selfish people cannot feel the pain and anguish of others and are unable to feel any kind of sympathy when others suffer. We have to understand that self-interest is based on common interest. Selfishness, classconsciousness, community consciousness, etc., are all reactions of our egoistic mind. Therefore we have to be free from our ego and raise our mental faculties beyond all narrow boundaries and engage ourselves in active inspired work.

To conquer desire.

Desire creates worries, sadness, jealousy, hatred, anger, pride, idleness and confusion. The inclination of desire is present when there is lack of love. But in divine love we can remove all our selfish desires.

To forget duality and to lose oneself in love.

We have to break the barricades of duality and bathe in the sea of Divine Love, and learn to live for our fellow beings. Divine Love means infinite compassion for all living beings. It inspires us to forget ourselves so that we can realise the sufferings of others. Love can break the selfish boundary of our ego. By Divine Love ignorance will disappear. Only pure love has the power to stop anger and violence. In love, anger turns into compassion, fear into friendship, destructive excitement into calm tranquility. Loveless life is full of hatred and jealousy. Therefore the great message of Christ is: "Love your enemy." Then may yesterday's enemy become your friend today. In my master Swami Paramananda's teaching: "Life is a journey of love towards fulfilment." He also said that Pure Consciousness is the Absolute Love.

To fill the heart with compassion.

When there is a shower of love in our heart, the heart is automatically filled with kindness, which is the source of compassion. Through compassion forgiveness, patience, tolerance, etc., arise in our mind, which are the keys to remove violence from our mind.

To establish equality.

The Divine Performer has countless names and forms, which are called individual souls. So how can we feel superior or inferior to one another? Actually there is no superior or inferior in the world. Everything is the manifestation of that Supreme Consciousness. One form can appear small or big, weak or strong, clever or foolish, but the inner vitality is the same. This knowledge of equality takes us far from violence and we can become able to forget all feelings of class, race, sect and community. We are only one race, one class, one sect and one community and that is humankind.

Now the question comes: *How to get this divine knowledge?*

We need *sadhana* (spiritual quest). Our way of practising *sadhana* is individual and according to one's nature. Some practise through knowledge (*jnana yoga*), some practise through devotion (*bhakti yoga*) and some practise through selfless service (*karma yoga*). *Jnana yoga* is for those with a strong intellect and a philosophic disposition of mind. For them meditation is very helpful. Meditation makes our mental state peaceful and harmonious. *Dhyana* (meditation) is absolutely necessary in our life to remove ignorance and to kindle the light of wisdom. *Jnana yoga* teaches us patience and truthfulness. *Bhakti yoga* is for those with a devotional nature and an emotional disposition of mind. For them *upasana* or divine contemplation is very helpful. *Upasana* is the art which takes man from the unnatural state of mind to the natural. This is necessary in order to prepare our mindstuff and overcome pain and suffering. But we need one "*ishta*" which means "object of contemplation" in whose contemplation all harmful elements are removed from life. *Bhakti yoga* is based on love which is coming from the heart and it teaches us love and humbleness. *Karma yoga* is for those with a physically active

nature and a strong will. *Seva* or selfless service is the medium to bring the flow of kindness and compassion. *Karma yoga* teaches us sacrifice and not to expect any fruits from our actions.

But before doing *sadhana*, *satsanga* (spiritual discussion and spiritual company) is very important, because *satsanga* develops our interest to do *sadhana*.

How can we use the non-violence theory practically in our daily life?

If we go back in history we can find a few great, noble men who have showed the way as to how we can avoid violence when we are living together in society like a big family. We can first remember Lord Buddha's teaching:

"Hate never ends by more hate, but by friendship. That is an eternal law."

"Don't look at others' mistake, what others have done and not done, but rather look at what you yourself have done or failed to do."

"All are trembling by the use of violence, and all love life and are afraid to die. Therefore place yourself in others' position and refrain from beating and killing."

"By friendship you conquer the angry, by goodness you conquer the evil, by generosity you can conquer the miser and the liar by truthfulness."

"If in battle anyone conquer thousands and thousands, still the greatest victor is the one who conquers himself."

Therefore Buddhism stands against all kinds of violence and destruction. According to it we must follow this advice of the Lord Buddha in our daily life. Then we are able to build a non-violent society, otherwise it is impossible to realise this word "non-violence".

Two hundred years before Christ, Emperor Ashoka was the ruler of Kalinga (one part of India). He had a completely violent nature and always tried to conquer his neighbours' countries by military force. Therefore there were many bloody wars in his period. But by the blessing of Lord Buddha he became a Buddhist and a pious man. He ruled his empire by putting into practice the Buddha's principle of non-violence. He made friendship with all the neighbouring countries and he was engaged in the spreading of the Buddha's ethics everywhere for the rest of his life. We can say that it was totally successful, because he didn't get any trouble from his neighbours.

Nowadays many great leaders and social reformers have used this Ahimsa philosophy in their movements. We can give at least two well known examples. One is the great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), and another is the great American leader Martin Luther King (1929-1968).

Mahatma Gandhi was inspired by the Lord Buddha's and Jesus Christ's teaching. The *ahimsa* philosophy was the ideal of his life. Therefore, as a man, he was noble and non-violent by nature. India was part of the British Empire at that time. His movement was to free his country from the British occupation. He didn't have any hate or aggression against the common English people ("I can not hate any living being, after a long period with continuous prayer I have no hate for anyone." From Gandhi's autobiography). He even got shocked and sorry if he heard that one white man had been killed or tortured by an Indian. Therefore the whole of his movement was completely based on non-violent principles by word, thought and peaceful activities.

After Gandhi many leaders in many countries were encouraged to use this non-violence theory in their movements, and Martin Luther King was one of them. At that time the black people were dominated by the white people in the USA. His movement was to get basic human rights, and he was inspired by Gandhi's idea of practical non-violence. Therefore all of his movement was completely peaceful and without any violence.

Although today many leaders in different countries try to use the non-violence theory in their practical life to solve conflicts and avoid war, still, unfortunately, I have to say, the world is not yet mature enough for the implementation of this principle of *ahimsa* in its absolute sense, and therefore we don't have complete security in our life in this society. Because still we haven't realised the eternal truth that we are only one race in the world and that that is the human race. Everybody belongs to one big family in the world (feeling of oneness).

Now we have to think of how we can survive in this society without thinking or doing anything violent. Those people who by heart have understanding about this non-violence idea and who have got success by using this

principle in their practical life, must try to convince others by love and friendship, and by spontaneous conversations about the evil side of violence and by unconditional welfare activities. By this way we can help the people motivated by violence to emerge from their ignorance.

As long as we are not able to build an absolutely non-violent society, how can we protect ourselves from any individual or nationwide attack? Should we be passive in this situation? The wise men say that we will not attack, nor make any violence against anyone, because this is not the way. But ofcourse we will have to resist. The question then arises, what kind of resistance will we offer?

One great Indian realised person, Sri Ramkrishna, has told a good parable: "Once a snake was initiated by a wise man and instructed not to harm anyone. It so happened one day that it was brutally tortured by a cowherd. But the snake did nothing to resist the attack, believing that it was following its master's instruction. When the wise man came to know of this happening, he told his disciple, 'You are such a fool! You don't know how to protect yourself. I asked you not to bite anybody, but I did not forbid you to hiss! Why didn't you scare the wicked boy away by expanding your neck?'" By this simple parable we can learn that without harming others we can show our mental courage and physical strength. In this way we can resist attack and violence.

Lord Buddha also said that every one has the right to live. It is necessary to resist when one is attacked. There are three powers which normally every human being has – the power of speech, the power of intellect and the power of muscle. We have also another power and that is the power of spirituality, but the ordinary souls are not conscious of this power. Only by *sadhana* can we realise that power. The truth is that if these three worldly powers are regulated by our spiritual power, then we can resist through non-violence: The power of speech through love and compassion, the intellectual power through wisdom and noble thinking, and the muscle power through sacrifice and good service. Otherwise these three worldly powers may be the cause of violence. So then we come to the conclusion that non-violence is based on spirituality.

What is spirituality? Spirituality means divine perception through life. That is the art of life and art of living. Only through spirituality is the highest manifestation of humanity possible. That means that one who has all good qualities as a human being is qualified as a spiritual man. Lack of spiritual perception is a hindrance to human progress. Therefore spiritual awakening is absolutely necessary for us to attain the pinnacle of civilization and fulfilment. Class community and race community disappear only with spiritual development.

By spiritual practice we can automatically get some psychic powers which are called *siddhis* in Indian. These psychic powers may come to those of us who are selfless so that we can help other people in distress, and they can also protect us in moments of danger. All the great prophets had and have these kinds of powers. We know from the life of the Buddha that he once was attacked by a dreadful robber, Angulimal, but as soon as he stood in front of Buddha he was not able to attack him, but fell down at the feet of Buddha. After that, by the blessing of Buddha, he turned into a good man. The robber Angulimal was "killed" by Lord Buddha and the noble Angulimal was born. This is the proper action. Also from the life of Sri Ananda Acharya we know about a similar incident. Once a hired assassin came with a gun to kill him, but as soon as he stood in front of Sri Ananda, he was greatly frightened by looking into Sri Ananda's face and he turned and ran away.

A realised soul sees only the entity in all the diversity. In other words he finds only God behind all individual masks. Therefore he can neither hate nor hurt anyone. If he does so it will simply rebound on him. Divinity itself provides protection to a soul like this. A realised soul overcomes desire, anger and fear, and he doesn't fear to die. Therefore, if he is attacked by someone, he does not react. "Those who are *Rishis* and sages – their religion is *Ahimsa Dharma*. Their heart is full of mercy having seen how those that breath are killed", says Sri Ananda Acharya. We can remember Christ's teaching: "Don't be against those who make pain for you. If one slaps you on your one cheek, give him your other cheek too". When he was crucified, He didn't resist or react against anyone, He only prayed to God for these ignorant people who were crucifying him, " Oh Lord! Forgive them! They don't know what they are doing." It is the greatest example of non-violence in the whole of history.

One may say that everybody cannot be a Lord Buddha or a Jesus Christ. For us who don't have that mental state that they had, it is necessary to protect ourselves from any attack or violence. But first of all I have to say that the human being is the son and daughter of Immortal Bliss. Therefore, every human being has the potential to develop and attain godliness. No person is worthy of contempt, and nobody is inferior or insignificant.

The message of the *Rishis* – the realised souls – in the *Upanishads*, sounds: "*Srinnantu Bisshya Amritasshya Putra*" - "Oh Son of Immortal Bliss! Listen! I have realised the Truth". Here it is maintained that the whole creation and the universe is the abode of the Immortal Entity. Therefore I can say that all great men realised the

Divine Truth and showed the real path so that we can follow it. It may be correct that we cannot be Buddha or Jesus in this life, but we can be able to reach the consciousness that jealousy, anger, immorality, violence, etc., are evil vices, and that wisdom, love, kindness, compassion, etc., are good qualities. Our ideal should be to destroy all these evils and instead raise all our goodness. Then we are also able to think for others' bliss which all the great souls do. "*Swarbe Sukhinah Vabantu, Swarbe Yanthu Niramaya, Swarbe Bhadrani Passhyantu, Ma Kaschid Dukkhya Bhak Bhabet*" – "May all beings be happy, may all beings be healthy, may all beings be blessed, may none come to sorrow and suffering." I know these blissful thoughts will lead us to attain practically the principle of non-violence.

Someone may say that this is nice to listen to, but completely impractical to apply in our daily life. Then I will ask them: Is it practical to hate each other, to kill each other, to live always with fear and insecurity like an animal in the forest? Do we have any experience that by evil we can destroy one's evil? On the other hand I can give many examples that by love and friendship we can turn evil into goodness. Then again, perhaps someone may say that this can be possible only for certain individuals, but will be impossible to follow on a nationwide or on an international basis. But I think that if it is not easy to march on the non-violent path, it is also not easy to have faith in violence. By believing in non-violence we at least have a hope to live without fear and with safety and happiness. But by violence we have to live like a moving dead body. Therefore we can try to use this principle. It may be risky, but not riskier than an atomic war.

After all these discussions we come to the conclusion which Mahatma Gandhi expressed, that non-violence is the greatest and most active force in the world. By the application of the non-violence principle in our daily life, we can get permanent safety both on the individual and on the collective level. For this we have to be non-violent by nature, and we have to take it as an ideal in our life. That means that we have to free ourselves as much as possible from ego and selfishness and move towards wisdom, love and compassion.

To reach our goal we must pray to God in our heart:

"*Asato Ma Satgamaya, Tamaso Ma Jotirgamaya, Mrityor Ma Amritam Gamaya*" (*Upanishads*) – "Take me from the temporal (feeling of individuality) to the Eternal (feeling of universality), from darkness (ignorance) to Light (wisdom), from death (fear) to Immortality (reliance which gives permanent happiness)."