

Ahimsa

A Six-Page Article on Nonviolence
From Hinduism Today



With a focus on doing no harm in life and in
business, with scriptural references



Ahimsa: To Do No Harm

We Can Change the Way Mankind Behaves by Practicing Nonviolence

BY SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI

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 noninjury 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 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 conscious-

ness. 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

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



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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

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

Taking Care of Business, Nonviolently

Ahimsa is not just a prohibition against physical and emotional assault



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Right livelihood: Beware the ill-gotten gains of ruthless business

BY SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI

▶ 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 Hin-

mus 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.

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. 🍷

Saints and Scriptures Speak on Ahimsa

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. Nonviolence 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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Harnessing Speech

Inner contemplation and outer discipline insure ahimsa in your daily interactions

BY SWAMINI MAYATITANANDA

THE HUMAN VOICE AS A DIVINE INSTRUMENT IS A POWERFUL, 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

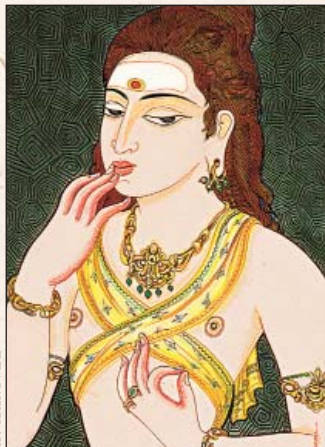
out his story nonstop. All I could hear was the young man’s anger about being pushed by Marion’s anger and his frustration about feeling inadequate and not “fitting in” with his friends. Marion had good intentions for her son, but like many parents who underestimate their children’s intelligence she 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.”

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The voice of ahimsa: Thinking before speaking