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Interpreting Gandhi's Non-violence: A Study of the Influence of Buddhist Philosophy

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Buddhism is commonly associated with non-violence and peace. It is important in Buddhism to see humans as part of the community of sentient beings in a conditioned world where suffering is endemic and thus to kill or harm another being deliberately, is to ignore one's own fragility and aspiration for happiness.

Buddhism also suggests that it is in understanding the impermanent nature of phenomena, that one can eschew violence.¹ It may be said that according to Buddhist position the ideal is to "let the law of impermanence, not lawlessness of violence, determine the life-span of all that lives: individuals, species, cultures, the earth as a whole."² Thus it can be seen that the Buddhist law of impermanence supports non-violence.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, or Mahatma Gandhi as he is better known, acknowledged the influence of Buddha on his thought. Albert Schweitzer in his analysis of Gandhi affirmed this point when he wrote that Gandhi continued "what the Buddha began. In Buddha the spirit of love set itself the task of creating different spiritual conditions in the world; in Gandhi it undertakes to transform all worldly conditions."³ Non-violence as an idea is original to Gandhi, primarily because it was he who made 'social' rather than 'mystical' use of the term.

In his writings, Gandhi recognizes that "wherever there is a clash of *ephemeral* [italics added] interests, men tend to resort to violence".⁴ He writes that it is because men see themselves separately with exclusive individual concerns and strive for personal benefits at any cost and as such they often resort to violence. For Gandhi "Ahimsa" (Non-violence) was important not just as a desirable virtue or merely as the means for the purification and ennobling of the soul but even more as the fundamental and perhaps the only way in which one could express one's respect for innate worth of the human being.

It is, indeed, an essential and universal obligation without which we would cease to be human. In this context, the Buddhist philosophy itself has laid stress on the 'heresy' of *attavada* or separateness: "In the Buddhist tradition *himsa* (violence) and *asatya* (untruth) alike proceed from *attavada*, the dire heresy of separateness. They equally constitute violence against the omnipresent truth, the subjection of a whole to a part or the pretence of the part to be the

whole.”⁵ Gandhi draws a distinction between the positive and negative meanings of ahimsa. For Gandhi:

In its negative form, it means not injuring any living being whether by body or mind. I may not, therefore, hurt the person or any wrongdoer or bear any ill will to him and so cause him mental suffering.. This statement does not cover suffering caused to the wrongdoer by natural acts of mine which do not proceed from ill will In its positive form, Ahimsa means the largest love, the greatest charity. If I am a follower of Ahimsa, I must love my enemy or a stranger to me as I would to my wrong doing father or son. The active Ahimsa necessarily includes truth and fearlessness.⁶ And also that :

“The basic principle on which the practice of non-violence rests is that what holds good in respect of oneself, equally applies to the whole universe. All mankind in essence are alike, what is therefore possible for one is possible for everybody”.⁷

The inability to put oneself in the position of an antagonist and to disarm or to convert him so that he ceases to regard himself as an irreconcilable enemy does not imply a stance of abdicating moral responsibility for Gandhi. Clearly, non-violence for him does not come from remaining passive and employing peaceful means to pacify, but it consists in remaining fully prepared for maintaining living and dynamic moral and spiritual values. It has been suggested that Gandhi was ready to respond actively to several challenging situations and to make non-violence more meaningful and concrete.⁸ Therefore, the non-violence Gandhi speaks of, clearly, does not abdicate moral responsibility. The following quote makes it clear:

While all violence is bad and must be condemned in the abstract, it is permissible for, it is even the duty of a believer in ahimsa to distinguish between the aggressor and the defender. Having done so, he will side with the offender in a non-violent manner, i.e., give his life in saving him.⁹

This example is very similar to the *Jataka Katha* which gives a description of Buddha cutting his head in order to scare the aggressor Angulimala.¹⁰ Another example of Buddha ‘choosing’ to sacrifice the life of a bandit, who has brought the lives of a boatful of people under threat, shows that Buddha seemingly, chose violence in certain conditions.¹¹ Various scholars have interpreted the concept of ahimsa in various ways and whereas some would concede to violence being legitimate situationally, some have entirely rejected it as per their reading of Buddhist texts. A Buddhist scholar, who strongly condemns killing, says: “Do not kill a living being, you should not kill or condone killing done by others. Having abandoned the use of violence, you should not use force against either the strong or the feeble.”¹² Looking at this example, it can be discerned that since the origins of Buddhism, the theory of non-violence has never been presented without some restrictions.

Gandhi had challenged detachment and in this context, the example is cited of Gandhi’s having put one ailing calf to death. Says Gandhi: “my action in putting the ailing calf out of

pain was a visible image of the purest ahimsa... If I had dealt with the calf as I did in order to assuage my own pain, it would not have been ahimsa, but it was ahimsa to assuage the calf's pain.

Indeed ahimsa implies an inability to go on witnessing another's pain... it is bad logic to say that we must look on while others suffer...ahimsa is a most powerful emotion and gives rise to multitudinous forms of beneficence. If it becomes manifest even in one man in all its splendour, its light would be greater than light of the sun."¹³ In fact, for Gandhi ahimsa entails the ability to treat all beings, as one's very self.

Gandhi's says in his stand (which he was criticized for), specifically when he advocated the extermination of pests and the killing of a rabid dog and an ailing calf in support of these apparently violent actions:

If I wish to be an agriculturist... I will have to use the minimum avoidable violence in order to protect my fields . . . If I do not wish to do so myself I will have to engage someone to do it for me. There is not much difference between the two. To allow crops to be eaten up by animals in the name of ahimsa, while there is a famine in the land, is certainly a sin. Evil and good are relative terms. What is good under certain conditions can become an evil or a sin under a different set of conditions.¹⁴

Gandhi firmly affirms his understanding when he says:

We are helpless mortals caught in the conflagration of himsa. Man cannot live for a moment without causing or unconsciously committing outward himsa. The saying that life lives on life has a deep meaning in it. Man cannot, for a moment, live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward himsa. The very fact of his living – eating, drinking and moving about – necessarily involves some himsa, destruction of life, be it ever so minute. A votary of ahimsa therefore remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability of the destruction of the tiniest creature, tried to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of himsa. He will be constantly growing in self-restraint and compassion, but he can never become entirely free from outward himsa.¹⁵

The greatest apostle of non-violence, it has been argued, also permitted violence, even if limited, for the sake of one's honour, justice, freedom and dignity. "He upheld the resistance of the Poles against the Germans as non-violent."¹⁶ This is further corroborated in the following statement of Gandhi: "Haven't I said to... women that, if in defence of their honour, they used their nails and teeth and even a dagger, I should regard their conduct non-violent . . . use your arms well if you must. Do not ill-use them."¹⁷

It has been suggested that Gandhi may have been acutely aware of the limitations of his theory:

He knew that his ideal of a completely non-violent society was unrealizable and that violence was necessary, unavoidable or understandable when used in the pursuit of such values as individual and social life, justice, the assertion of human dignity and the development of courage or when provoked by unbearable oppression.¹⁸

Erasmus gives an argument which is directly opposed to every purpose for which, according to his vision, man has been created. Erasmus insisted that man is born not for destruction, but for love, friendship and service to his fellow men.¹⁹ In Gandhi's words the glamour in armed intervention is "the glamour of misused heroism and sacrifice in a bad cause."²⁰

It has been suggested that if social progress is measured by the evolution of cooperation and of peaceful means for the resolution of conflicts, then international society still appears to be very primitive.²¹ Characterized mainly by stark necessities of a Hobbesian society, which has not yet evolved a fully articulated social contract, international order is based not so much on consensus of its participants as on the physical fact that states coexist and cannot escape from interaction.²²

It has been suggested that conflicts can be resolved by debates in which opponents try to convert each other.²³ It was this aspect that Gandhi was keen to explore understand and live through. The dual process of disarmament (most importantly the internal) and development of a joint force would be both multilateral and democratic, the right of the majority to criticize or even intervene in the event of one nation violating the basic rules, would be ensured. With all large armies eliminated and all conflicts such as border disputes subject to the control of the joint international force, large and small nations would be truly equal, resulting in a stable international order.²⁴

Conflicts between nations are based on the same problems as those between individual human beings. Buddhists identify the most basic of these as greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and ignorance (avijja/avidya), disrespect for the precepts and intolerance.²⁵ According to the renowned philosopher Radhakrishnan, "hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; it is appeased by love."²⁶ Since the first precept is non-harming (ahimsa) in Buddhist philosophy, Buddhists obviously disapprove of violence.²⁷ Thus, it is also said that the general tenor of Buddhism is one of pacifism and non-violence (ahimsa).²⁸ However, it has been suggested that it would not be accurate to say that Buddhists would find the idea of destruction of the world or the annihilation of mankind totally new:

Traditional Buddhist cosmology describes vast universes and worlds within them, all of which come and go in cycles of evolution and dissolution. All worlds are impermanent (avicca). They develop and change and eventually pass away. What is important within this great movement of evolution and dissolution is the growth of sentient beings towards the state beyond extinction; the unborn, changeless peace of Nirvana.²⁹

Nirvana, which is considered the goal of Buddhist practice and the experimental core of the Buddha's teaching and is seen as the cessation of suffering, is commonly described as "supreme bliss." It has been admitted that an adequate description of the 'perfect peace' of Nirvana is not possible.³⁰ What becomes clear is that Nirvana, which can be seen as the state of cessation of all conflicts, is designed as a state in which, primarily, at the mental or psychological level, problems or conflicts have been solved.³¹ In this context, significantly Buddha's analysis as well as his teaching places considerable emphasis on the mental factor which gives rise to anger, tension, conflict and violence. This emphasis is amply clear in the opening verse of the Dharmapada.³²

It has been suggested that although there are important social and political implications of the Buddha's teachings, and although the primary emphasis is on the internal processes, motivations and conduct of the individual, their wider implications cannot be ignored either. Thus, an example is cited of the teachings on 'right livelihood' of the eight-fold path, which prohibits a layperson from trading in weapons, human beings, flesh, intoxicants and prisons. Military services, hunting and fishing are effectively ruled out for lay followers in the early texts. The ban on hunting and fishing has obvious implications for meat eating, particularly amongst the Tibetan Buddhists. Said the Buddha in the Descent Into Lankavatara Sutra: "All meats known by seeing, by hearing, or by suspicion to have been killed 'for oneself' must be fiercely deprecated."³³ However, in the Mahayana Sutra known as "For The Wise Ones," the Buddha says again: "In order to fulfill the great purpose, to consume meat brings no faults"³⁴ and again in the Descent Into The Lankavatara Sutra, he says: "If either one who will not eat what is not permitted, or a Bodhisattva be ill with such a disease as a danger to life or a hindrance to good then without remorse and without hesitation, he may think of these things as a remedy and eat them."³⁵

Transformative approach to mediation or dialogue

The term conflict resolution is used broadly to refer to any process that is used to end a conflict or dispute in a peaceful way; (war seldom being considered to be a means of conflict resolution, even though it does resolve conflicts once it is over). Used in this way, conflict resolution refers to all judicial processes and alternative dispute resolution techniques – negotiation, mediation, arbitration as well as consensus building, diplomacy, analytical problem solving, and peacemaking. It involves all non-violent means of solving interpersonal, inter-group, inter-organizational, or international problems. The term refers to a relatively stable resolution of a conflict which is deep-rooted. This is done by obtaining and identifying the underlying sources of that conflict (usually fundamental human needs or value differences) and then instituting socio-economic and/or political changes that allow the values or needs of all sides to be met simultaneously.³⁶ It may be said that:

From the perspective of essential unity, the recognition that there is conflict, makes it possible for a recognition of interdependence of those in conflict... [conflict] becomes a problem to be addressed — a brokenness to be healed — and at the same time an opportunity to realize our

fundamental interdependence, and through this realization, to restore a sense of unity. This is why conflict always represents... an opportunity.³⁷

A recent movement in conflict resolution studies introduces the transformative approach to mediation. This approach, which is significant for this study, sets the goal of changing not just situations, but the people themselves through mediation activities, which encourage empowerment and mutual recognition. This typically, is one approach adopted by Gandhi whereby he suggests that all persons ought to see every other person essentially as humans.

Therefore he suggests that instead of using force, listening to other's views, ideas and opinions is more beneficial. In the conflict management field, the term dialogue refers to a method of getting people who are involved in deep-rooted conflict, to sit down together with a facilitator and to talk and listen, with the goal of increasing mutual understanding and, in some cases, coming up with joint solutions to mutual problems. Dialogue is seen as contributing to conflict resolution, firstly, by demonstrating that people from opposing sides can learn from one another. Secondly, it encourages the formation of and linkage with other dialogue groups, which spreads the goodwill further and enhances the sense of efficacy of participants. Thirdly, dialogue groups can collect, reinvent, or generate creative ideas that might contribute to a solution, and they can then publicize these ideas to decision makers and their own populations. Fourthly, they can obtain access to influential or powerful people who might be able to implement their ideas.³⁸ Even though Marx and Fanon said that violence was the midwife of history and that only in periods of violence did history show its true face, Gandhi refuses to acknowledge this position.³⁹

Gandhi had declared that the non-violent way to freedom would be found to be the shortest, even though it may appear to be the longest, to our impatient nature.⁴⁰ He also said: "enemy is... the evil which men do, not the human beings themselves."⁴¹ The effects of Buddha's idea of non-violence persist in Gandhian philosophy of non-violence,⁴² and application of it in the socio-political sphere is seminal to Gandhi.⁴³

Endnotes

1. Some scholars have attempted to explain environmental issues from the Buddhist perspective by drawing a parallel from the Buddhist concept of impermanence: Impermanence of Phenomenon is a tenet of Buddha's teaching. While teaching that we must accept transitoriness, he forbade willful killing. It was Buddha's injunction that in order to retain our environment, we must not kill and destroy beyond the capacity of Mother Earth. Doboorn Tulku Lama, *The Buddhist Path to Enlightenment: Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy and Practice*, California: Point Loma Publications, 1996, pp. 162-163.
2. Doboorn Tulku Lama, *The Buddhist Path to Enlightenment: Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy and Practice*, California: Point Loma Publications, 1996, p. 163.

3. Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1936, p. 231 as cited in Raghavan Iyer. *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, London: Concord Grove Press, 1983, p. 215.
4. M.K. Gandhi, *Ashram Observances in Action*, trans. from Original Gujarati by Valji Govindji Desai, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, (1932) 1955, p. 45.
5. Iyer, n.3, p. 226.
6. Letter in *Modern Review*, October 1916 as cited in Iyer, n. 9, p.180.
7. D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, vol. 4 1934-1938, Bombay: Vithalbai K. Jhaveri and D.G. Tendulkar, July 1952, p. 353.
8. H.M. Joshi, "Violence—Gandhian Technique of Resisting Violence," *Journal of Oriental Institute*, (Baroda: Oriental Institute), no.1-2, September-December 1993, p. 82.
9. Iyer, n.3, p.203.
10. Graeme MacQueen, "Engaged Nonviolence," In Sulak Sivaraksa (Hon.ed.), Pipob Udomittipong & Chris Walker (eds.), *Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millennium: Essays in Honour of the Ven. Phra Dhammapitaka* (Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto) on his 60th Birthday Anniversary, Bangkok: Sathikoses-Nagapradipa Foundaion and Foundation for Children, 12 May 2542 (1999), p. 265.
11. "Having embarked one day on a boat that was crossing a river and seeing a bandit who was threatening the lives of other passengers, he chose to sacrifice the life of the bandit." The Dalai Lama and Carrière, n.25, pp. 172 - 173.
12. Saddhatisa, H., *Buddhist Ethics*, Allen and Unwin, 1970, p.88 as cited in Linus Pauling et al., *World Encyclopedia of Peace*, vol. I, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1986, p.98.
13. *The Diary of Mahadev Desai*, edited and trans. by Valji Govindji Desai, vol. I, Yeravda-Pact Eve, 1932, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1953, pp. 110-11.
14. M.K. Gandhi, "Religion V. No Religion," *Harijan: A Journal of Applied Gandhism*, vol.X-1946, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1973, p.172.
15. M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography Or The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, trans. by Mahadev Desai, Ahmedabad: Navjivan, (1927) 1956, p. 349.
16. Birinder Pal Singh, *Problem of Violence: Themes in Literature*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1999, p. 176.

- 17 *ibid.*, p. 176.
18. Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*, Delhi, Sage, p. 137.
19. Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. VI, New York: Cromwell Collier & Macmillan Inc., 1967, p. 65.
20. "A Revolutionary's Defence," *Young India* (Weekly Paper), vol. VII, 12 February 1925, edited by M.K. Gandhi, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1981, p.60.
21. Joseph Frankel, *International Relations in a Changing World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1979) 1981, p. 96.
22. *ibid.*, p.171.
23. Anatole Rapaport, *Fights, Games and Debates*, Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1960 as cited in Iyer, n.3, p. 188.
- 24 *ibid.*, p. 155.
25. Peggy Morgan and Clive Lawton (ed.), *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996, p.88.
26. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Dharamapada* (trans.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950 as cited in Morgan and Lawton, n. 82, p. 88.
27. Morgan and Lawton, p.88.
28. *ibid*, p. 89.
- 29 *ibid.*, p. 90.
30. "Buddhism," In Pauling et al., p. 97.
- 31 *ibid.*, p. 98.
32. The opening verse of the Dharmapada: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought. It is founded on our thoughts. It is made up of our thoughts," J. Mascaro, *The Dharamapada*, London: Penguin, 1973, p. 98.

33. Tsepak Rigzin and Francesca Hamilton, "Buddhism and Meat Eating," *Tibetan Review*, (Delhi), vol. XVII, no. 9, September 1983, p. 8.
34. *ibid.*, p. 10.
35. *ibid.*, p. 10.
36. Heidi Burgess and Guy M. Burgess, *Encyclopedia of Conflict Resolution*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1997, pp. 76-77.
37. Paul Redetop, "The Emerging Discipline of Conflict Resolution Studies," *Peace Journal*, (Manitoba, Canada), vol. 31, no 1, February 1991, p.78.
38. Burgess and Burgess, pp. 97, 99.
39. Iyer, n. 3, p.222.
40. M.K. Gandhi, "War or Peace," *Young India* (Weekly Paper), vol. VIII, 20 May 1926, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1981, p.184.
41. D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, vol. 8, 1947-1948*, Bombay: Vithalbhai K. Jhaveri and D.G. Tendulkar, 30 January 1954, p.339.
42. Therefore it has been argued that a tradition that originated 2500 years ago, remains compelling even today, primarily because Buddhism has shown that its definition of the human condition and its solutions to finite existence have enduring value, even so, to those in the contemporary world. Stephen D. Glazier (ed.), *Anthropology of Religion*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997, p.349.
43. D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, vol. 4, 1934-1938*, Bombay: Vithalbhai K. Jhaveri and D.G. Tendulkar, July 1952.