

Ahimsa

Ahimsa (the ‘m’ is nasal, like *dans* in French, the ‘a’ is long) is the ancient Sanskrit term usually translated as, and possibly the model for, ‘nonviolence.’ The translation is unfortunate, however, in that such negative compounds in Sanskrit were more positive in effect than the corresponding, literal translations in English. *Abhaya*, for example, literally ‘non-fear’ actually was the word for ‘courage.’ This has caused endless confusion in English, where ‘nonviolence’ or worse, ‘non-violence’, is already mistaken for a negative—the absence of violence—where it really stands for ‘love in action.’

Equally important, it is likely that the word *himsa*, built on the Sanskrit root \sqrt{han} ‘strike, slay’ was what linguists call a ‘desiderative.’ That would mean that *ahimsa* should actually be translated something like ‘the force unleashed when desire to harm is eradicated.’ Of course, ‘nonviolence’ is handier! And that’s fine, as long as we realize its limitations.¹

the follow excerpt is from “Gandhi the Man” by Eknath Easwaran:

Ahimsa, nonviolence, was the noblest expression of Truth for Gandhi—or, properly speaking, the way to Truth.

“Ahimsa and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin, or rather a smooth unstamped metallic disc. Who can say which is the obverse and which the reverse? Nevertheless ahimsa is the means; truth is the end.”

Ahimsa is the bedrock of Satyagraha, the “irreducible minimum” to which satyagraha adheres and the final measure of its value.

In the traditional lore of India there is a story about an old sannyasi, a Hindu monk, who was sitting on the bank of a river silently repeating his mantram. Nearby a scorpion fell from a tree into the river, and the sannyasi, seeing it struggling in the water, bent over and pulled it out. He placed the scorpion back in the tree, but as he did so, the creature bit him on the hand. He paid no heed to the bite, but went on repeating his mantram. A little while later, the scorpion again fell into the water. As before, the monk pulled him out and set him back in the tree and again was bitten. This little drama was repeated several times, and each time the sannyasi rescued the scorpion, he received a bite.

¹ Source: <https://mettacenter.org/definitions/gloss-concepts/ahimsa/>

It happened that a villager, ignorant of the ways of holy men, had come to the river for water and had seen the whole affair. Unable to contain himself any longer, the villager told the sannyasi with some vexation:

“Swamiji, I have seen you save that foolish scorpion several times now and each time he has bitten you. Why not let the rascal go?”

“Brother,” replied the sannyasi. “the fellow cannot help himself. It is his nature to bite.”

“Agreed,” answered the villager. “But knowing this, why don’t you avoid him?”

“Ah, brother,” replied the monk, “you see, I cannot help myself either. I am a human being; it is my nature to save.”

Ahimsa is usually translated as “nonviolence,” but as we have seen, its meaning goes much beyond that. Ahimsa is derived from the Sanskrit verb root *san*, which means to kill. The form *hims* means “desirous to kill”; the prefix *a-* is a negation. So *a-himsa* means literally “lacking any desire to kill,” which is perhaps the central theme upon which Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist morality is built. In the *Manu Smriti*, the great lawbook of Hinduism, it is written, “Ahimsa paramo dharma”: ahimsa is the highest law. It is, as Gandhi puts it, the very essence of human nature.

“Nonviolence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law—to the strength of the spirit.”

The word nonviolence connotes a negative, almost passive condition, whereas the Sanskrit term *ahimsa* suggests a dynamic state of mind in which power is released. “Strength,”

Gandhi said, “does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.” Therein he found his own strength, and there he exhorted others to look for theirs. Latent in the depths of human consciousness, this inner strength can be cultivated by the observance of complete *ahimsa*. Whereas violence checks this energy within, and is ultimately disruptive in its consequences, *ahimsa*, properly understood, is invincible. “With *satya* combined with *ahimsa*, “Gandhi writes, “you can bring the world to your feet.”

When Gandhi speaks of *ahimsa* as a law, we should take him at his word. Indeed, it was a law for him like gravity; and could be demonstrated in the midst of human af-

fairs. Gandhi even characterized his practice of ahimsa as a science, and said once, “I have been practicing with scientific precision nonviolence and its possibilities for an unbroken period of over 50 years.” He was a precise man, meticulous and exacting, fond of quoting a Marathi hymn that goes, “Give me love, give me peace, O Lord, but don’t deny me common sense.” He valued experience as the test of truth, and the nonviolence he pursued and called “true nonviolence” had to conform to experience in all levels of human affairs. “I have applied it,” he declares, “in every walk of life: domestic, institutional, economic, political. And I know of no single case in which it has failed.” Anything short of this total application did not interest Gandhi, because ahimsa sprang from and worked in the same continuum as his religion, politics, and personal life. Daily practice could determine its value, “when it acts in the midst of and in spite of opposition,” and he advised critics to observe the results of his experiments rather than dissect his theories.

“nonviolence is not a cloistered virtue to be practiced by the individual for his peace and final salvation, but it is a rule of conduct for society. To practice nonviolence in mundane matters is to know its true value. It is to bring heaven upon earth. I hold it therefore to be wrong to limit the use of nonviolence to cave dwellers [hermits] and for acquiring merit for a favored position in the otherworld. All virtue ceases to have use if it serves no purpose in every walk of life. “

Gandhi’s adherence to nonviolence grew from his experience that it was the only way to resolve the problem of conflict personally. Violence, he felt, only made the pretense of a solution, and sowed seeds of bitterness and enmity that would ultimately disrupt the situation.

One needs to practice ahimsa to understand it. To profess nonviolence with sincerity or even to write a book about it was, for Gandhi, not adequate. “If one does not practice nonviolence in one’s personal relationships with others. one is vastly mistaken. Nonviolence, like charity, must begin at home.” The practice of nonviolence is by no means a simple matter, and Gandhi never intimated that it was. As a discipline, a “code of conduct,” true nonviolence demands endless vigilance over one’s entire way of life because it includes words and thought as well as actions.

“Ahimsa is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt a part of ahimsa. But it is its least expression. The principle of ahimsa is

hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody. It is also violated by our holding on to what the world needs.”

Ekknath Easwaran (1910-1999) was one of the twentieth century's great spiritual teachers and an authentic guide to timeless wisdom. He was a recognized authority on the Indian spiritual classics, and was an interpreter and translator of such texts as The Bhagavad Gita, The Upanishads, and The Dhammapada.