

8. NONVIOLENCE AND JUSTICE AS  
INSEPARABLE PRINCIPLES:  
A GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE

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**T**he *Mahābhārata*, the Grand Hindu epic, celebrates the virtue of *ahimsā* (nonviolence):

Ahimsa (nonviolence) is the highest dharma (law, sacred duty). 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. (*Mahābhārata* XIII: 116:38-39)<sup>1</sup>

*Ahimsā*, of course, is one of the most fundamental concepts associated with Gandhi's life and work. But, interestingly it is also this which is most likely to be misconstrued. Gandhi's understanding and use of *ahimsā* is broader, more active, and less immediately intuitive than the word suggests. It is as complex as Gandhi's character, that of both an aspiring saint and rebellious political leader.

The *Mahābhārata* glorifies *ahimsā* (nonviolence) as the highest dharma. This notion became one of the central axioms of Hindu ethics and yogic philosophy.<sup>2</sup> *Ahimsā* is fundamental to Gandhi's political and personal philosophy. To understand his *ahimsā* and its foundations in Hindu philosophy it is essential to know the etymological meanings of the word *ahimsā* and *dharma*. The Sanskrit word *ahimsā* is literally a negation of the word *himsā*, "killing" or "injury" and hence is translated as "not-harming" or "non-injury."<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, however, the principle of *ahimsā* is much broader: it includes abstaining from harming others not only in actions but also in thought and speech. It is difficult, if not impossible, to practice *ahimsā* in the true sense of the word. The *Mahābhārata* recognizes *ahimsā* as the highest form of self-control and sacrifice.

The word *dharma*, literally "that which sustains," has no English equivalent and is generally translated as law, duty, virtue and justice.<sup>4</sup> Rendered as justice, it implies sustenance of law and righteousness; it

is the universal principle of harmony. It mandates that we seek equilibrium and balance. But, understood in this way, it is different from the system of legal judgment as it aims at fairness and equity. For the latter, the word *nyāya* is used.<sup>5</sup> The concept of *nyāya* is comparable to the modern judicial system in which legal justice is sought on the grounds of argumentation and evidence.

Thus the Sanskrit phrase—*ahimsā parmōdharma*—can be translated as “nonviolence is the greatest duty or virtue” or “nonviolence is the highest law,” i.e. it is the greatest duty of human beings to harm no living being. Abstaining from any form of violence requires extreme discipline and vigilance. Gandhi was aware of the “impossibility” of practicing absolute nonviolence: “Perfect nonviolence is impossible so long as we exist physically. . .”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, often the customary understanding of *ahimsā* equates it with passivity—abstention from action, especially that which involves conflict. *Ahimsā* represents the highest level of self-control. Understood merely as self-control or self-limitation, it leads one to conquer the seductions of ego, but can also translate into complete passivity and therefore indifference to, and even deliberate avoidance of, socio-political issues.

In his philosophy and practice, however, Gandhi, unequivocally inverts the traditional understanding of *ahimsā* (as passivity, acquiescence or withdrawal) into an active notion. For him it is not merely abstention from injury, but the highest justice: real *ahimsā*, according to Gandhi, requires resisting the structures of violence. “The principle of nonviolence necessitates complete abstention from exploitation in any form,” emphasizes Gandhi.<sup>7</sup> This may seem only superficially opposed to *ahimsā* construed as passivity (in performance of apparently aggressive actions), but this is where Gandhi is often misunderstood. To clarify what it came to mean for him, we must look at the very beginning of his career.

Gandhi’s political life as well as his spiritual journey began in South Africa. Mohandas Gandhi, a young lawyer trained in England and dressed in western clothes, was neither acquainted with the politics of nonviolent activism, nor was he grounded in spirituality.

One evening, while he was on a South African train, a white man objected to his traveling first-class because he was “colored.” In spite of the conductor’s threat to “push” him out of the compartment, Gandhi refused to get off the train, noting that he carried a first-class ticket. He asserted that it was his right to travel first class. In spite of his

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*ahimsā parmodharma*—can be translated duty or virtue” or “nonviolence is the best duty of human beings to harm no one. Any form of violence requires extreme force. Gandhi was aware of the “impossibility” of perfect nonviolence. “Perfect nonviolence is impossible so long as there is conflict. Therefore, often the customary understanding of nonviolence is with passivity—abstention from action in conflict. *Abimsā* represents the highest form of nonviolence, not merely as self-control or self-limitation but as freedom from the seductions of ego, but can also transcend indifference to, and even address, political issues.

And, however, Gandhi, unequivocally including in his concept of *ahimsā* (as passivity, acquiescence, and non-resistance) a non-reactive notion. For him it is not merely the highest justice: real *ahimsā*, according to the structures of violence. “The principle of complete abstention from exploitation in nonviolence is not passivity.”<sup>7</sup> This may seem only superficially oppositional to nonviolence (in performance of apparently nonviolence where Gandhi is often misunderstood). For Gandhi, however, we must look at the very

beginning of his spiritual journey began in South Africa. A young lawyer trained in England and never before acquainted with the politics of nonviolence, he was grounded in spirituality.

On a South African train, a white man was ejected from first class because he was “colored.” In spite of being ejected from him out of the compartment, Gandhi protested that he carried a first-class ticket. He demanded the right to travel first class. In spite of his

resistance, the constable pushed him and his luggage off the train at one of the stations. Obstinate in asserting his rights, he had refused to move to the third class compartment and the train steamed away. Feeling shocked and humiliated, the barrister spent the entire night in the “cold, bleak and windswept waiting room” at the train station reflecting on the incident. This direct encounter with prejudice had awakened him to the darker side of humanity: social injustice manifested in forms of colonial suppression and racism. In the grave silence and bitter cold of that dark night, Gandhi, the lawyer, must have considered seeking retribution for the humiliating and discriminatory action carried out against him. He records the incident in his autobiography.

I began to think of my duty. Should I fight for my rights or go back to India...? It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation. The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial—only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process.<sup>8</sup>

Gandhi decided to fight for the rights of Indians and social justice (which he later extended to a fight for India's independence), but not with arms; and he decided to seek justice, but not retribution. This form of justice consists of mercy and forgiveness—“not returning two slaps for one,” nor retaliation—“tit for tat”—as demanded by modern judicial systems. This decision in favor of non-retributive justice would seem quixotic and impractical to those who even remotely understood the titanic power of the British Empire as well as the shrewdness that goes with Gandhi's profession, namely the practice of western law. But Gandhi had deep insight into the power of the “Mighty Empire” as well as into the strengths and weaknesses of the native people. Perhaps this is precisely why he wanted to fight the situation by utilizing a weapon mightier than, and also unfamiliar to, his opponent: nonviolence. He states:

The British want to put the struggle on the plane of machine guns where they have the weapons and we do not. Our only assurance of beating them is putting the struggle on a plane where we have weapons they do not.<sup>9</sup>

Gandhi had realized as a result of both his professional training and his knowledge of the Hindu metaphysical Law of Karma, that sustainable justice cannot be achieved by violent means. The concept of karma or “action” is central to Hindu ethics and is understood as the



universal principle of cause and effect. Every action and thought produces "moral reverberations" which spill over into not only this life but our next lives as well. S. Radhakrishnan, a prominent scholar of Indian philosophy, summarizes the law of karma: "All acts produce their effects which are recorded in both organism and environment... Good produces good, evil, evil. Love increases our power of love, hatred, our power of hatred."<sup>10</sup> Justice is not served in one lifetime, but may take eons. It flows from our actions. The Law of Karma makes justice so comprehensive and mysterious that it is impossible to think that using violent means can lead to sustainable justice. A violent response to almost any circumstance only perpetuates the cycle of retribution.

It is not, however, immediately clear how *ahimsā* can be used as a weapon; nor is it obvious how justice mandates nonviolence. There are numerous apparent contradictions in Gandhi's approach to justice, war, and nonviolence. Clarification of some of them is attempted below.

*Ahimsā*, the principle of Hindu ethics understood as a private virtue and a retreat from socio-political action, paradoxically, presents an ethical problem: What to do about the structures of social violence—the kind Gandhi experienced in the train? These generally accepted and institutionalized inequities automatically inflict suffering on many every day. Should an individual who is committed to nonviolence simply ignore them? Or tolerate them? Is silence in the face of this to be interpreted as consent? Gandhi transforms the traditional principle of withdrawal from harmful action into an innovative ideology: One should not retreat from such actions, but actively engage in a fight against evil by using nonviolent methods: "*Ahimsā* without action is an impossibility" because virtues such as *ahimsā* can only be practiced in the domain of action.<sup>11</sup> Gandhi's interpretation of it is thus contrary to the commonplace understanding of *ahimsā* within the tradition.

Gandhi naturalized the ethical principle *ahimsā* for the political arena. He transformed this spiritual virtue into a political device—"a celestial weapon"—in order to resist the structures of violence. For this passive yet powerful form of resistance, he had to develop a new term, *satyāgraha*, literally, "*soul-force* as opposed to armed strength."<sup>12</sup> *Satyāgraha* is often translated as passive resistance, which is quite the opposite of Gandhi's definition. As he explained it, "submit not to evil, and take the consequences." For him, this kind of nonviolent confrontation "is a more active and real fight against wickedness than

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retaliation whose very nature is to increase wickedness."<sup>13</sup> Such active resistance to evil, however, does not logically arise out of conventional forms of *ahimsā* as it is portrayed in ancient Hindu texts. This leap from the non-active, privately spiritual idea to the active, "public" spirituality of *satyāgraha* is one of Gandhi's most original insights. As he says, *ahimsā* "does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means the pitting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire..."<sup>14</sup>

This form of *ahimsā* is directly grounded in active compassion. Gandhi explains the connection when he says, "There is as much difference between *ahimsa* and compassion as there is between gold and the shape given to it, between a root and the tree which sprouts from it. Where there is no compassion, there is no *ahimsa*. The test of *ahimsā* is compassion. The concrete form of *ahimsa* is compassion."<sup>15</sup> *Ahimsā* brimming with compassion seeks not merely reaction, but moral conversion. In his biography of Gandhi, D.G. Tendulkar writes, "Gandhi's ambition was nothing less than the conversion of the British Empire through nonviolence, so as to make them see the wrong they have done."<sup>16</sup>

Gandhi's *ahimsā*—suffering for others—necessitates fighting against social injustice. "Resistance of violence by self-suffering"—*satyāgraha*—by its very nature, according to Gandhi, results in sustainable justice. In his rendition of *ahimsā* as "resistance to social injustice by nonviolent means" Gandhi seems to be interpreting the phrase *ahimsā parmodharma* as "nonviolence is the highest justice." As he says, "no man could be actively nonviolent and not rise against social injustice no matter where it occurred."<sup>17</sup> However, his pursuit of justice seems convoluted, too, insofar as he would actively seek social justice, but not against those who commit evil. Where he shows no shyness in destroying structures of violence, he is infinitely patient with and compassionate toward the evildoer. Consider the following rather startling proclamation:

The purest way of seeking justice against the murderers is not to seek it... Their punishment cannot recall the dead to life. I would ask those whose hearts are lacerated to forgive them, not out of their weakness—for they are able every way to have them punished—but out of their immeasurable strength. Only the strong can forgive.<sup>18</sup>

Does this not contradict the conventional principles of justice, i.e. most any system of reward and punishment? And, is it even practical? Gandhi's idea of justice might seem absurd, but it is clear that, on his theory as it is related to *ahimsā*, he seeks resolution without revenge. This stands in sharp contrast to the modern legal system. Of this higher form of justice, he says, "In undiluted justice is mercy."<sup>19</sup> The practitioner of *ahimsā* seeks a permanent solution: justice not in retribution but in conversion of the soul of the evildoer by the power of mercy and compassion. In his words, "Tit for tat' is a wrong principle. It is certainly not based on forgiveness. What can we gain by being wicked with the wicked? The good lies in our showing love and compassion even for such persons."<sup>20</sup>

As noted, Gandhi's *ahimsā* as the highest form of justice, *ahimsā parmodharma*, might seem to contradict the traditional understanding of it as mere withdrawal from violent actions for the purpose of personal spiritual fulfillment. But, the foundations for Gandhi's interpretations of it go much deeper than one might initially think. They lie in the Hindu notion of ontological identity, the unity of the self and other. *Ātman* (literally Self or Spirit) dictates that within each one of us there resides a divine reality. The other is none other than our very own self and none other than the Divine Reality. This is also a central claim of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. This apparently war-affirming narrative was Gandhi's favorite text. He interpreted it allegorically and looked to it for metaphysical and ethical insights. It affirms the need for an ethical engagement and does so by reference to foundational metaphysical principles of Hinduism. It sets a standard for wisdom and was therefore for Gandhi a sort of guiding light: "The man equipped with discipline looks on all with an impartial eye, seeing *Ātman* in all beings and all beings in *Ātman*."<sup>21</sup> Realization of the unity of self and other renders meaningless the issue of retribution and violence; at the same time, it affirms the need for self-sacrifice, for resisting social violence. The other is one's very own self. Traditional Hindu metaphysics and modern altruistic social concern meet in Gandhi's interpretation of *ahimsā* as *dharma* (the highest justice).

Mahatma Gandhi was also aware of the moral dilemmas associated with prohibiting violence in all situations. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* presents the reader with what is perhaps the direst of all predicaments, the choice between violence and nonviolence in a time of war. Gandhi's



dict the conventional principles of justice, i.e. reward and punishment? And, is it even practical? Justice might seem absurd, but it is clear that, related to *ahimsā*, he seeks resolution without sharp contrast to the modern legal system. Of justice, he says, "In undiluted justice is mercy."<sup>19</sup> *Ahimsā* seeks a permanent solution: justice not in the perversion of the soul of the evildoer by the power of the sword. In his words, "Tit for tat' is a wrong principle based on forgiveness. What can we gain by showing wicked? The good lies in our showing love and respect to each person."<sup>20</sup>

*Ahimsā* as the highest form of justice, *ahimsā* does not seem to contradict the traditional understanding of withdrawal from violent actions for the purpose of non-violence. But, the foundations for Gandhi's interpretation are much deeper than one might initially think. They are rooted in the unity of ontological identity, the unity of the self and the other (Self or Spirit) dictates that within each one of us lies the Divine Reality. The other is none other than our very self. This is also a central theme in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. This apparently war-affirming narrative is reinterpreted. He interpreted it allegorically and looked for spiritual and ethical insights. It affirms the need for an ethical standard and does so by reference to foundational metaphysics of Hinduism. It sets a standard for wisdom and justice. Gandhi offers a sort of guiding light: "The man equipped with an impartial eye, seeing *Ātman* in all beings, is in *Ātman*."<sup>21</sup> Realization of the unity of self and other transcends the issue of retribution and violence; at the same time, the need for self-sacrifice, for resisting social violence, for the good of one's very own self. Traditional Hindu metaphysics and modern social concern meet in Gandhi's interpretation of *ahimsā* (the highest justice).

Gandhi was also aware of the moral dilemmas associated with non-violence in all situations. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* presents what is perhaps the direst of all predicaments, the tension between justice and nonviolence in a time of war. Gandhi's

trust in the power of nonviolence caused him, however, to deliberate further on this:

Suppose a man runs amuck and goes furiously about sword in hand, and killing anyone that comes his way, and no one dares to capture him alive. Any one who dispatches this lunatic will earn the gratitude of the community and be regarded as a benevolent man. From the point of view of *ahimsa* it is the plain duty of everyone to kill such a man.<sup>22</sup>

*Ahimsā* for Gandhi is an active force, *himsa* is only for sustaining justice and ensuring the well being of others when all options have been exhausted. The latter is like a "surgeon's knife"<sup>23</sup> and is actually a form of *ahimsā*. Gandhi warns against passivity in the name of practicing *ahimsā*.

He who refrains from killing a murderer who is about to kill his ward (when he cannot prevent him otherwise) earns no merit, but commits a sin, he practices no *ahimsa* but *himsa* out of a fatuous sense of *ahimsa*.<sup>24</sup>

*Ahimsā* does not "simply mean non-killing" but compassion and justice.<sup>25</sup> In his commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Gandhi claims that "Compassion contrary to the just action is not compassion, but hostility."<sup>26</sup> His rendering of *ahimsā* as justice and mercy is in full agreement with praise of *ahimsā* in the *Mahābhārata* as the "highest justice" and the "greatest sacrifice." Self-sacrifice for the other is *ahimsā*—one's highest duty. Gandhi's justice is not blindfolded, but proceeds with the open eyes of wisdom overflowing with mercy. His political and moral journey began with the direct experience of social injustice in South Africa, and he subsequently experimented with, and successfully utilized, both existing ethical principles of Hindu tradition and Western activist ideas.<sup>27</sup> He also drew on legal reasoning in his efforts to guarantee human dignity by confronting social evils. Perhaps such experimentation in synthesis of principles is necessary once again given the quandaries we are now facing as regards terrorism and retribution.

By redefining the ethic of *ahimsā* in the light of the Hindu notion of ontological identity—the unity of the self and the other—Gandhi shows us the full power of this principle, one which juxtaposes in *ahimsā*, both justice and mercy.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In the translation of *Mahābhārata* by M.N. Dutt the word *ahimsā* is translated as "abstention from cruelty." The *Mahābhārata* (Anushasana Parva: 116. 38-39), translated by M.N. Dutt, Delhi: Parimal Publications, 1994, p. 256. *Ahimsā parmōdharma* (Nonviolence is the greatest of all virtues or duties) became the axiom of Gandhi's political movement.
- <sup>2</sup> In the *Mahābhārata*, *ahimsā* is the highest of all ethical virtues: "As the feet of all beings having feet fit in an elephant's foot, so is all virtues (dharma) and worldly pursuit (artha) sustained in nonviolence." *The Mahābhārata* (Śanti Parva: 245. 18-19), translated by M.N. Dutt. In the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patanjali, *ahimsā* is first of the five restraints, including truth, not stealing, self-restraint, and non-possessiveness, essential for liberation.
- <sup>3</sup> "There is violence at the root in the very act of living and hence arose the negative word *ahimsā* indicating of the dharma to be observed by embodied beings." In *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 45, p. 286.
- <sup>4</sup> The word *dharma* is not easily translated into English. It has several meanings: Cosmic Law, ethical law, virtue, sacred duty, right justice, religion, and righteousness. *Dharma* is the cosmic principle of balance, harmony and justice.
- <sup>5</sup> The Sanskrit word *nyāya* means, standard, method, axiom, in the right manner, logical or syllogistic argument or inference, lawsuit, judicial sentence, etc. In Hindi and Gujarati languages (in which Gandhi spoke and wrote) the word *nyāya* is used for justice and legal proceedings similar to those of the western judicial system.
- <sup>6</sup> Gandhi, Mahatma, 1990. *All Men are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections*, compiled and edited by Krishna Kriplani, New York: Continuum, p. 83.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- <sup>8</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas K., 1957. *An Autobiography, The Story of my Experiments with Truth*. Translated from the original Gujarati by Mahadev Desai. Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 111-112.
- <sup>9</sup> Collins, Larry and Lapierre, Dominique, *Freedom at Midnight*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975. p. 64.
- <sup>10</sup> Radhakrishnan, S., 1980. *An Idealist View of Life*. London: Unwin Paperbacks, p. 218.
- <sup>11</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *The Collected Work of Mahatma Gandhi*. Vol. 45, p. 285.
- <sup>12</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 16, pp. 6-7.
- <sup>13</sup> Gandhi writes for *Young India* (1925). Gandhi, Mahatma, 1990. *All Men are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections*, compiled and edited by Krishna Kriplani, New York: Continuum, p. 85.
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted in Barash, David P., 1999. *Approaches to Peace: A Reader in Peace Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 184.
- <sup>15</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, "ahimsa vs. compassion," Vol. 45, p. 285.



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<sup>16</sup> Clough, Bradley S., Gandhi, 2001. "Nonviolence and the Bhagavad-Gita,"  
 in *Holy War, Violence And The Bhagavad-Gita*, ed. Rosen, Steven J., Vir-  
 ginia: Deepak Publishing, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Gandhi, Mahatma, 1990. *All Men are Brothers, Autobiographical Reflections*.  
 Compiled and edited by Krishna Kriplani. New York: Continuum, p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 22, pp. 412-  
 413.

<sup>19</sup> Gandhi, M.K., 2001. *The Bhagavad-Gita According to Gandhi*, ed. John  
 Strohmeir. Berkeley, California: Berkeley Hills Books, p. 107.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 180.

<sup>21</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *The Bhagavad-Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 123.

<sup>22</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 36, p. 449.

<sup>23</sup> Gandhi writes: "The surgeon who, from fear of causing pain to his patient,  
 hesitates to amputate a rotten limb is guilty of *himsa*." In *The Collected*  
*Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 36, p. 449.

<sup>24</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 36, p. 449.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 449.

<sup>26</sup> Gandhi, M.K., 1995. *Gītā Mātā* (in Hindi) Delhi: Sasta Sahitya Mandal,  
 p. 142.

<sup>27</sup> "Indian Opinion reported in June, 1990, a lecture by Gandhi on "The Ethics  
 of Passive Resistance," wherein he was reported as saying that: Jesus Christ,  
 Daniel and Socrates represented the purest form of resistance or soul force  
 (*atmabal*). Resist not evil meant that evil was not to be repelled by evil but  
 by good; in other words, physical force was to be opposed not by its like,  
 but by soul force. The same idea was expressed in Indian philosophy by the  
 expression "freedom from injury to every living thing." In Jordens, J.T.F.,  
 1998. *Gandhi's Religion, A Homespun Shawl*. New York. Palgrave, p. 220.