

Ahiṃsā and the International Day of Peace

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Good afternoon, and Namaste! I am most grateful to be invited to speak at the United Nations to underscore the importance of the International Day of Peace. My topic for today is the yogic value of *ahiṃsā*, which is often translated as *nonviolence*, but which, as we shall see, has even more profound and far-reaching consequences than this humble translation suggests.

The centrality of *ahiṃsā* to the yogic traditions of India cannot be exaggerated. In at least three different systems of spiritual practice—Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist—it is listed first among the ethical virtues that a serious aspirant on the spiritual path must practice. Interestingly, these systems list *ahiṃsā* even before *satya*, or truth. This primacy of nonviolence suggests that, when faced with the choice to press forward with our own interpretation of truth or to be mindful of the well-being of others, we opt for the well-being of others. This is an important lesson for all of us who are committed to various belief systems and ideologies. We always like to win arguments; but our pursuit of truth must always take into account the feelings of others, that we not deliberately belittle or disrespect them in the name of making our point.

In the *Yoga Sūtra* of Patañjali, *ahiṃsā* is listed first amongst the *yamas*, or ethical restraints, which together make up the first of the eight limbs of Patañjali's eight-limbed yoga system. Far from being merely a set of physical exercises, Patañjali's yoga is a holistic approach to life, including an ethical system in which *ahiṃsā* is the foremost value. Also from the Hindu tradition, one finds in the *Mahābhārata* the teaching, *ahiṃsā paramo dharmah*: “*Ahiṃsā* is the highest duty.”

In the Buddhist tradition, *ahiṃsā* is also the first of the five moral precepts taught by the Buddha. These five precepts overlap with Patañjali's *yamas*, with four of the five precepts being identical to four of the *yamas*. *Ahiṃsā* in practice amounts to a life of compassion for all beings, which is a core Buddhist value, seeing the sufferings of others as the same as one's own.

In the Jain tradition, *ahiṃsā* is also listed as the first of the five *vrats*, or vows, which observant Jains are enjoined to practice. The Jain vows are identical to Patañjali's *yamas*. For lay Jain practitioners, or householders, they are called *anuvrats*, or ‘small vows.’ The lay Jain observes these vows, such as *ahiṃsā*, to the degree that is possible within the constraints of living an active life in the world, with worldly responsibilities. The Jain ascetic, on the other hand, observes a stricter version of these vows, called the *mahāvrat*, or ‘great vows.’ These involve observing *ahiṃsā* and the other practices to the highest degree humanly possible. This requires setting aside householder life and devoting oneself fully to this profound level of observance. To illustrate the difference between the small vows and the great vows, we can point out, for example, that a Jain layperson who is observing *ahiṃsā* will be strictly vegetarian, and will avoid any deliberate harm to small life forms in the environment. But she will nevertheless go about what most people would call a normal routine of activities. Jain ascetics observing *ahiṃsā*, though, will not wear shoes (to avoid accidentally treading upon small life forms). They carry a whisk to gently sweep the ground in front of them as they walk, and any surface on which they may be about to sit, also to protect small life forms. Some will wear a cloth mask, or mouth-shield, to avoid accidentally ingesting or inhaling small life forms. If they are unable to continue observing these strictures for reasons relating to health or old age, they will voluntarily give up all consumption of food, offering their lives as a sacrifice to the well-being of others.

Ahiṃsā is not simply nonviolence. It is the absence of even the desire to let any living being come to harm. It is, in other words, nonviolence in thought, word, and deed. It does not refer simply to avoiding active harm against living beings, while otherwise remaining indifferent to them. *Ahiṃsā* is the desire to ensure that all living beings live happily and free from fear of injury. While it can be translated as nonviolence, it can also be translated as love, or compassion for all beings.

As a yogic value, the centrality of *ahimsā* to all these traditions can be seen in their lived practice and in the fact that it is consistently listed as the first of the moral virtues that form the essential foundation for spiritual progress. All of these traditions are unanimous in affirming, “First, do no harm.” Indeed, do not even *will* any harm, or speak in a harmful way. How different would our world be today if all our leaders were to observe this principle?

How can the virtue of *ahimsā* inform humanity’s collective aspiration for world peace, which the International Day of Peace affirms? How can we make every day an International Day of Peace? Clearly, the strictures observed by Jain ascetics are not accessible to the vast majority of human beings. This is something the Jain tradition itself affirms in making a distinction between the small vows and the great vows. The yogic traditions unanimously affirm that we are each at different points on the spiritual path. Expecting everyone to practice at the same level would be like expecting a grade school student, who is just learning to add, subtract, multiply, and divide, to solve sophisticated calculus equations. *Ahimsā*, as a value, is absolute, but its application will vary depending upon where we are in our spiritual journey.

Indeed, affirming the value of *ahimsā* is even consistent, for some, with defending themselves and their families with force if necessary. Even Mahatma Gandhi, the figure most widely associated with *ahimsā* in the modern world, affirmed the occasional necessity of force for self-defense; but he also said in this regard that if we are committed to *ahimsā*, “we have to choose the path of least violence.” He also strongly rejected cowardice, and affirmed that cowardice is even worse than violence.

Ahimsā is not at all consistent, however, with the glorification of violence or war, or hatred toward any living being: even those who seek to do harm. Using force while being committed to *ahimsā* means using only that much force as is required to prevent even greater suffering. It also means maintaining compassion even toward those against whom one uses force. This noble ideal is expressed well by the Chinese sage Lao-tzu in his *Daodejing*:

The wise person enters a battle gravely,
with sorrow and with great compassion,
as if attending a funeral.
(*Daodejing* 31)

It is expressed equally well by Jimmy Carter, who said, “War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good.”

On this International Day of Peace, in 2019, as nations continue to pour resources into weaponry and many of our leaders and fellow citizens see war not as an occasionally necessary evil, but as something to be pursued with enthusiasm, and with hatred for the enemy, affirming the value of *ahimsā* means taking a firm stand against all such glorification of violence. *Ahimsā* is rooted in the realization of the interconnectedness and ultimate oneness of all life. On World Peace Day, let us affirm the words of the *Mahā Upaniṣad: vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*. Humanity is a single family. When we harm others, or even wish to harm others, or express our approval for harm being done to others, in reality, we harm ourselves. Similarly, when we work for peace, and for the well-being of all, we are, in reality, as Swami Vivekananda has affirmed, helping ourselves. I conclude with Swamiji’s words, “Do not injure another. Love everyone as your own self, because the whole universe is one. In injuring another, I am injuring myself; in loving another, I am loving myself.” (CW 1.364)