

Ahimsa—The Virtue of Non-Violence

In the practice of yoga, one of the concepts taught as a preliminary practice is known as “ahimsa”, generally translated as “non-violence”, although sometimes referred to as “harmlessness”. This concept is intended to purify the seeker to prepare for spiritual realizations that are not achievable if the psychological “platform” of consciousness is too disturbed. The practice of violence is simply too disrupting and thereby conflicts with spiritual focus.

It is of course an interesting exercise in self-awareness when one begins to view the various impulses to action in the course of daily action to seek out the actual instances and roots of violence. Eventually the seeker begins to understand that the question is not as simple or straightforward as one would like to expect, and that at subtle levels of consciousness, violence takes many unexpected forms.

Physical violence involves altercations in which physical blows are exchanged with another. As with all types of violence, physical violence can be defensive or offensive in nature. Defensive violence is defined when one is warding off an attack on oneself or another. Offensive violence is defined when one is perpetrating an attack on another. In most cases it is quite easy to define defensive from offensive when it comes to physical altercations; and many yogis will advise that “non violence” is not the same as “pacifism”; thus reminding that self-defense and by extension, defense of those for whom one is responsible, is sometimes necessary in the world.

Where we get into more subtle distinctions is whether the attack one is warding off in “defensive” mode was actually something that was provoked. For instance, using aggressive language or unfair tactics to provoke someone into attacking so that there is a “justification” for the defensive violence being used. It is clear that governments recognize that “defensive” response is more “legitimate” than “offensive” action. There is a long history of aggressors using either trumped up acts of aggression to legitimize their going to war; or else, have worked to provoke an attack through relatively “secret” actions behind the scenes. Examples that come to mind include the start of the invasion of Poland by Germany in World War II which was sparked by an alleged Polish attack on the German border, which in fact was carried out by German provocateurs dressed in Polish army uniforms. The Gulf of Tonkin incident that expanded US involvement in the Vietnam war was later found to have been entirely trumped up by the government of the USA. Similarly, the justification for a new doctrine of pre-emptive war put forth by the recent administration of George W. Bush to support the invasion of Iraq was an expansion of the concept of “defense” to attack a country on the basis that it “might” at some time in the future, pose a threat to the USA and that it had supported the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington DC of al Qaeda, a charge that was totally trumped up. The common thread in all these cases is an attempt to make aggression “legitimate” by making it appear to be defensive in nature.

On a personal level we see things like race-baiting or use of provocative, inflammatory language used to stir up people, which then “justifies” a violent response. A march by the Ku Klux Klan through Skokie, Illinois was largely judged to be an act of provocation to incite potential violence, for example. This happens frequently in individual, interpersonal interactions where we see bullying or domination occurring “one on one”. The principle is the same whether it occurs at the individual, group, or societal level.

We begin to see the interplay of forces more at the level of vital and emotional violence, where individuals create energetic situations that breed violence. Sometimes this is through emotional calls intended to band together individuals against another person or group, or as a result of anger, fear,

hatred, lust, and greed acting upon the consciousness and breeding an atmosphere filled with hostile energies. Individuals can easily be moved by the emotional power of a clan, tribe, group or nation, particularly under the spell of a charismatic emotional leader, and thus we see that individuals can frequently be caught up in violence churned at the societal level.

At the mental level violence is perpetrated through the development of ideas and plans that inherently manipulate situations for the sake of ideology or planning for control and mastery for the sake of gaining and holding power. Just about any ideology can create circumstances where violence is created either overtly or covertly. Covert violence for instance could involve setting up economic circumstances through “stacking the deck” in an economic system so that a small plutocracy controls most of the wealth and they exploit through actual or virtual slavery most others in society. Such ideological violence can easily be seen wherever one finds a huge and inordinate disparity between the wealth in the hands of a small elite versus a large highly disenfranchised minority. Similarly we find it where the decision making power for the actions and goals of the society are set by a small minority and others are forced to comply with that direction even if it goes against their own individual or ideological directions. This can be seen in the case of religious fundamentalism and nationalistic or imperial fervor that creates an environment for pogroms, sectarian violence or crusades to occur.

A more subtle view of violence can be even seen in the way we choose to organize our societies and our economic life on a macro level. For instance, the industrial consumption-oriented society which developed in the USA, and Western European countries has both seized control of inordinate amounts of the world’s resources, particularly energy resources, thereby limiting access for the vast populations in other parts of the world; but has also created a serious change to the world climate through global warming and the effects of environmental pollution. One can argue that as long as it was “unconscious” there is not an issue of “non violence” here, but once it became known and recognized, continued propagation of actions and systems that increase suffering and dislocations to other beings sharing the planet clearly becomes an act of violence and thus, subject to review and modification as we strive towards “harmlessness”.

If we expand our view of “harmlessness” to include interactions with other beings, it is easy to understand that one of the biggest motivators of aggression is fear. Another is narrowly defined “self interest”. We thus hunt wolves to extinction because they exercise their normal instincts to eat in an ever-shrinking habitat. We wantonly spray pesticides to eliminate “bees” because we are uncomfortable with and afraid of them. We eliminate enormous amounts of the rainforest, and the beings that depend on that rainforest, to satisfy our modern day craving for a diet based on meat. The long-term impact on the environment, the food chain, the balance of nature is totally ignored as we strike out in unreasoning fear with violent reaction.

So as to not mislead ourselves, it is also important to realize that violence can be extremely subtle such as acts we undertake that undermine the confidence and self-image of others or ourselves. The impact of such acts can be long-term suffering. This can be seen in the reactions of children to negative reinforcement in their education process; as well as in the way that many people in cultures around the world treat women by reinforcing a self-image of artificially-defined beauty or defining them as subservient sexual objects.

Violence also occurs at the level of thought and emotion which has real physiological impact, as well as sets up vibratory patterns which subtly influence those around us, including those at whom the violence of thought or emotion is being directed. Thus, simply refraining from an outward manifestation of the

violence does not satisfy the concept of “ahimsa” because the practitioner of yoga, the yogi, is interested in creating a psychological platform capable of sustaining development of consciousness, and thus, the psychological impact is every bit as important as the outward act.

As we recognize the violence that permeates our individual and collective existence, it then becomes essential to determine what can be done to make progress toward the goal of “non-violence” or “harmlessness.”

The first step is self-examination and recognition of the triggers of violence within ourselves. The understanding of the deep roots of violence in all its forms within our actions and reactions is essential for any long-term process of integrating “ahimsa” into our psychological makeup and thus, achieving one of the important bases of yogic practice.

The second step is to start where one is and begin to address these issues and systematically work to reduce the reactions of violence within ourselves and expand the scope of these changes over time. The inner cultivation of peace and non-attachment is an essential step toward creating the right psychological atmosphere for ahimsa. On one level, it is necessary to understand that the psychological reaction of violence is to some degree “hard wired” into the human psyche through long millennia of history and culture. On another level, it is necessary to begin to act as the “witness” of the psychological responses within oneself and begin to disentangle those things that are attempting to provoke our response of violence. And on another level, we can begin to develop strategies of alternative responses to retrain the instrument and re-code the reactions. It is a good first step to be able to restrain the outward manifestations of violence, but it does not go far enough. Eventually, all the inner roots of reaction need to be purified and redirected, and this is where the real work can actually take place. The third step is to be able to develop such an unshakable peace that nothing can disturb or move one to violence in thought, word or deed. This step is part of the consummation of the practice of yoga and contact with the yogi’s atmosphere. The legends of lions laying down with lambs in the presence of a man of peace are apocryphal and speak to this realization.

It is one thing to acknowledge and adopt the need for ahimsa, or practice of non-violence. It is quite another to actually accomplish the realization. This needs to be seen in terms of a process over time and includes the realization that becoming angry with oneself for “slips” along the way is not really helpful or useful. It is important to recognize the slips for what they are, part of the long, back and forth process of making progress in the yogic path, and not let them disturb the long term vision or action. Concurrently with the inner realizations come the outer actions, since inner and outer are irrevocably tied to one another as a unity. Steps can be taken to begin to transform the way we educate children for instance to avoid the use of corporal punishment and to help them understand the options available rather than the first resort to violence. On the societal and cultural level, it is important to begin to inject the evolutionary perspective of the alternatives available as we see over time when cultures begin to work with mutual support, dialogue and ecumenism rather than warfare and domination as the standard for relationship between nations, cultures and religions. The extension of the concepts recognized internally in one’s own practice leads inevitably to creating an atmosphere of support, good will, and increasing harmony in our relationship to the societies within which we live.

Eventually the concept of ahimsa takes on a much more dynamic aspect of realization of the absolute oneness of all life; and we begin to recognize that violence directed towards another is violence directed towards oneself; and that the functioning of the law of karma, the chain of cause and effect, implies that no energy or action is “lost”. Thus, we find that ahimsa, one of the preliminary practices of yoga, can

lead us right to the gates of the ultimate universal and transcendental realizations that are the consummation of yoga.

Santosh Krinsky
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Santosh Krinsky is the President of the Institute for Wholistic Education, a non-profit organization dedicated to the integration of spirituality into daily life, based on the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo (www.wholisticinstitute.org) as well as the Editor-in-Chief of Lotus Press, a publisher of Spiritual and Alternative Health books.