



The Meaning and Practice of Ahimsa

Mohandas K. Gandhi

The Doctrine of Ahimsa

Literally speaking, ahimsa means ‘non-killing’. But to me it has a world of meaning, and takes me into the realms much higher, infinitely higher, than the realm to which I would go, if I merely understood by ahimsa non-killing. Ahimsa really means that you may not offend anybody; you may not even harbor an uncharitable thought, even in connection with one who may consider himself to be your enemy.

Pray notice the guarded nature of this thought; I do not say “whom you would consider your enemy,” but “who may consider himself to be your enemy.” For one who follows the doctrine of ahimsa, there is no room for an enemy; he denies the existence of an enemy. But there are people who consider themselves to be his enemies, and he cannot help that circumstance. So it is held that we may not harbor an evil thought even in connection with such persons. If we return blow for blow, we depart from the doctrine of ahimsa.

But I go further. If we resent a friend’s action, or the so-called enemy’s action, we still fall short of this doctrine. But when I say that we should not resent, I do not say that we should acquiesce; but by ‘resenting’ I mean wishing that such harm should be done to the enemy; or that he should be put out of the way, not even by an action of ours, but by the action of somebody else, or, say, by divine agency. If we harbor even this thought, we depart from the doctrine of ahimsa. Those who join the Ashram have literally to accept that meaning.

That does not mean that we practice that doctrine in its entirety. Far from it. It is an ideal which we have to reach, and it is an ideal to be reached even at this very moment, if we are capable of doing so. But it is not a proposition in geometry; it is not even like solving difficult problems in higher mathematics—it is infinitely more difficult than solving those problems. Many of you have burnt the midnight oil in solving those problems. If you want to follow out this doctrine, you will have to do much more than burn the midnight oil. You will have to pass many a sleepless night, and go through many a mental torture and agony, before you can even be within measurable distance of this goal. It is the goal, and nothing less than that, which you and I have to reach if we want to understand what a religious life means.

I will not say much more on this doctrine than this: that a man who believes in the efficacy of this doctrine finds in the ultimate stage, when he is about to reach the goal, the whole world at his feet, not that he wants the whole world at his feet, but it must be so. If you express your love—ahimsa—in such a manner that it impresses itself indelibly upon your so-called enemy, he must return that love. Another thought which comes out of this is that, under this rule, there is no room for organized assassinations, or for murders openly committed, and there is no room for any violence even for the sake of your country, and even for guarding the honor of precious ones that may be under your charge. After all, that would be a poor defense of their honor. This doctrine tells us that we may guard the honor of those under our charge by delivering ourselves into the hands of the man who would

commit the sacrilege. And that requires far greater mental and physical courage than the delivery of blows.

You may have some degree of physical power—I do not say courage—and you may use that power. But after that is expended, what happens? The other man is filled with wrath and indignation, and you have made him more angry by matching your violence against his; and when he has done you to death, the rest of his violence is delivered against your charge. But if you do not retaliate, but stand your ground, between your charge and the opponent, simply receiving the blows without retaliating, what happens? I give you the promise that the whole of his violence will be expended on you, and your friend will be left unscathed. Under this plan of life there is no conception of patriotism which justifies such wars as you witness today in Europe.

The Law of Love

Courage and Non-Violence

My non-violence does not admit of running away from danger and leaving dear ones unprotected. Between violence and cowardly flight, I can only prefer violence to cowardice. I can no more preach non-violence to a coward than I can tempt a blind man to enjoy healthy scenes. Non-violence is the summit of bravery. And in my own experience, I have had no difficulty in demonstrating to men trained in the school of violence the superiority of non-violence. As a coward, which I was for years, I harboured violence. I began to prize non-violence only when I began to shed cowardice. Those Hindus who ran away from the post of duty when it was attended with danger did so not because they were non-violent, or because they were afraid to strike, but because they were unwilling to die or suffer an injury. A rabbit that runs away from a bull terrier is not particularly non-violent. The poor thing trembles at the sight of the terrier and runs for very life....

Non-violence is not a cover for cowardice, but it is the supreme virtue of the brave. Exercise of non-violence requires far greater bravery than that of swordsmanship. Translation from swordsmanship to non-violence is possible and, at times, even an easy stage. Non-violence, therefore, presupposes ability to strike. It is a conscious deliberate restraint put upon one's desire for vengeance. But vengeance is any day superior to passive, effeminate and helpless submission. Forgiveness is higher still. Vengeance too is weakness. The desire for vengeance comes out of fear of harm, imaginary or real. A dog barks or bites when he fears. A man who fears no one on earth would consider it too troublesome even to summon up anger against one who is vainly trying to injure him. The sun does not wreak vengeance upon little children who throw dust at him. They only harm themselves in the act....

Just as one must learn the art of killing in the training for violence, so one must learn the art of dying in the training for non-violence. Violence does not mean emancipation from fear, but discovering the means of combating the cause of fear. Non-violence, on the other hand, has no cause for fear. The votary of non-violence has to cultivate the capacity for sacrifice of the highest type in order to be free from fear. He reckes not if he should lose his land, his wealth, his life. He who has not overcome all fear cannot practice ahimsa to perfection. The votary of ahimsa has only one fear, that is of God. He who seeks refuge in God ought to have a glimpse of the Atman that transcends the body; at the moment one has a glimpse of the Imperishable Atman, one sheds the love of the perishable body. Training in non-violence is thus diametrically opposed to training in violence. Violence is needed for the protection of things external, non-violence is needed for the protection of the Atman, for the protection of one's honour.

This non-violence cannot be learned by staying at home. It needs enterprise. In order to

test ourselves we should learn to dare danger and death, mortify the flesh, and acquire the capacity to endure all manner of hardships. He who trembles or takes his heels the moment he sees two people fighting is not non-violent, but a coward. A non-violent person will lay down his life in preventing such quarrels. The bravery of the non-violent is vastly superior to that of the violent. The badge of the violent is his weapon—spear, or sword, or rifle. God is the shield of the non-violent.

from *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*.

The Difficulty of Ahimsa

The greatest difficulties perhaps were encountered as regards the observance of ahimsa. There are problems of truth, but it is not very hard to understand what truth is. But in understanding ahimsa we every now and then find ourselves out of our depth. Ahimsa was discussed in the ashram at greater length than any other subject. Even now the question often arises whether a particular act is violent or non-violent. And even if we know the distinction between violence and non-violence, we are often not able to satisfy the demand for nonviolence on account of weakness which cannot easily be overcome.

Ahimsa means not to hurt any living creature by thought, word or deed, even for the supposed benefit of that creature. To observe this principle fully is impossible for men, who kill a number of living beings large and small as they breathe or blink or till the land. We catch and hurt snakes and scorpions for fear of being bitten and leave them in some out-of-the-way place if we do not kill them. Hurting them in this way may be unavoidable, but it is clearly himsa as defined above.

If I save the food I eat or the clothes I wear or the space I occupy, it is obvious that these can be utilized by someone else whose need is greater than mine. As my selfishness prevents him from using these things, my physical enjoyment involves violence to my poorer neighbor. When I eat cereals and vegetables in order to support life, that means violence done to vegetable life.

Surrounded thus as I am by violence on all sides, how am I to observe non-violence? Fresh difficulties are bound to arise at every step as I try to do so.

The violence described above is easily recognized as such. But what about being angry with one another? A teacher inflicting corporal punishment on his pupils, a mother taking her children to task, a man losing his temper in his intercourse with equals, all these are guilty of violence, and violence of a bad type, which is not easy to tackle. Violence is there whether there is attachment on the one hand and dislike on the other. How are we to get rid of it?

The first lesson therefore that we in the ashram must learn is that although to sever some person's head from his body for the sake of the country or the family or oneself is indeed a violent act, the subtle violence involved in injuring the feelings of other people day in and day out is possibly very much worse than that. Murders committed in the world will seem to be numerous when considered by themselves and not so numerous when compared with the number of deaths due to other causes; but the subtle violence involved in daily loss of temper and the like defies all attempts at calculation.

We are constantly striving in the ashram to deal with all these kinds of violence. All of us realize our own weaknesses. All of us including myself are afraid of snakes, for instance. We therefore as a rule catch them and put them out of harm's way. But if someone kills a snake out of fear, he is not taken to task. There was once a snake in the cowshed, and it was impossible to catch it where it was. It was a risky thing to keep the cattle there; the men were afraid of working thereabouts. Maganlal Gandhi felt helpless and permitted them to

kill that snake. I approved of his action when he told me about it. I believe that even if I had been there on the spot, I could not have done anything other than what he did. My intellect tells me that I must treat every snake as my kinsman and at the risk of losing my life I must hold the snake in my hands and take it away from those who are afraid of it. But in my heart I do not harbor the necessary love, fearlessness and readiness to die of snake-bite. I am trying to cultivate all these qualities but have not succeeded in the attempt. It is possible that if I am attacked by a snake, I may neither resist nor kill it. But I am not willing to place anyone else's life in danger.

Once in the ashram the monkeys made a terrible nuisance of themselves and did extensive damage to the crops. The watchmen tried to frighten them by making a show of hurling stones from a sling but in vain. He then actually threw stones and injured and crippled one of the monkeys. I thought this even worse than killing it. I therefore held discussions with co-workers in the ashram, and finally we took the decision that if we could not get rid of the monkeys by gentle means short of wounding them, we must kill one or two of them and end the nuisance. Before this decision was taken there was a public discussion in the columns of the Navajivan which may be consulted by the curious.

No one outside India thinks that one should not kill even a violent animal. Some individuals like St. Francis observed this rule, but the common people did not, so far as I am aware. The ashram believes in the principle, but it is a pity that we have not succeeded in putting it into practice. We have not still acquired the art of doing this. It is possible that many men will have to lay down their lives before this art is mastered. For the present it is only a consummation devoutly to be wished for. The principle has long been accepted in India but the practice is very imperfect on account of our laziness and self-deception....

Nonviolence sometimes calls upon us to put an end to the life of a living being. For instance a calf in the ashram dairy was lame and had developed terrible sores; it could not eat and breathe with difficulty. After three days' argument with myself and my co-workers, I had poison injected into its body and thus put an end to its life. The action was nonviolent, because it was wholly unselfish inasmuch as the sole purpose was to achieve the calf's relief from pain. It was a surgical operation, and I should do exactly the same thing with my child if he were in the same predicament.

Many Hindus were shocked at this, but their reaction to the incident only betrays their ignorance of the nature of ahimsa, which has for so long ceased to be a living faith, and has been degraded into formalities complied with when not very inconvenient.

Here we must take leave of the ashram experiments with ahimsa as regards sub-human species.

Ahimsa as regards sub-human life is from the ashram point of view an important aspect but still only one aspect of this comprehensive principle. Our dealings with our fellow men are still more important than that. The commonest form of human intercourse is either violent or nonviolent. Fortunately for humanity nonviolence pervades human life and is observed by men without special effort. If we had not borne with one another, mankind would have been destroyed long ago. Ahimsa would thus appear to be the law of life, but we are not thus far entitled to any credit for observing it.

Whenever there is a clash of ephemeral interests, men tend to resort to violence. But with a deliberate observance of nonviolence a person experiences a second birth or "conversion." We in the ashram are out to observe ahimsa intelligently. In doing so we meet with numerous obstacles, disappointments and trials of faith. We may not be satisfied with observing ahimsa in deed only. Not to think badly of anyone, not to wish ill to him though we have suffered at his hands, not to hurt him even in thought, this is an uphill task, but therein lies the acid test of our ahimsa.

Thieves have visited the ashram from outside, and there have been thieves in the ashram

itself. But we do not believe in inflicting punishment on them. We do not inform the police; we put up with the losses as best we may. This rule has been infringed at times. A thief was once caught red-handed by day. The ashramite who caught him bound him with rope and treated him contemptuously. I was in the ashram at the time. I went to the thief, rebuked him and set him free. But as a matter of fact ahimsa demands from us something more than this. We must find out and apply methods which would put a stop to thieving altogether. For one thing we must diminish the number of our “possessions” so as not to tempt others. Secondly we must bring about a reformation in the surrounding villages. And thirdly the ashram ministry should be extended in scope so that the bad as well as the good would learn to look upon the settlement as their own.

We thus find it impossible for a man with “possessions” to observe ahimsa even in the gross meaning of that term. A man of property must adopt measures for its security involving the punishment of whoever tries to steal it. Only he can observe ahimsa who holds nothing as his own and works away in a spirit of total detachment. If there are many such individuals and organizations in society, violence will not be much in evidence. As gunpowder has a large place in a society based upon violence and a soldier who can handle it with skill becomes entitled to honor and rewards, even so in a nonviolent society self-suffering and self-control are its “munitions of war,” and persons endowed with these qualities are its natural protectors. The world at large has still not accepted ahimsa in this sense. India has accepted it more or less but not in a comprehensive manner. The ashram holds that ahimsa should be universal in scope, and that society can be built up on the foundations of ahimsa. It conducts experiments with this end in view, but these have not been very successful....

A History of the Satyagraha Ashram.