

TEMPLE OF UNDERSTANDING – INDIA & US

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE on INTERAITH HARMONY: PEACE and NONVIOLENCE

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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In a world which is so divided, so full of strife and conflict, where nations compete with each other in the mastery of the art of violence by innovating ever more advanced forms of lethal weaponry and that too with the help of cutting-edge scientific research, it seems to me to be nothing short of a miracle that the concept of Ahimsa, nevertheless, has been with us from time immemorial.

I do not know what textual evidence is there that can enable us to determine how old the word Ahimsa is in the Sanskrit literature. However, for sure the word definitely does occur in the Chandogya Upanisad, which some scholars date back to 8th cent B.C. In any case none to my knowledge questions the claim that this document belongs to the pre-Buddhist period. Ahimsa is listed here as one of the cardinal virtues. Again, while projecting a soteriological vision that seems to be pan-Indian, it is said in this same Upanisad that the practitioner of Ahimsa or non-violence alone can escape the cycle of rebirth or metempsychosis (C.U. 8.15.1).

Notice that in its most rigorous formulation, the practice of Ahimsa bars one from inflicting any form of injury or violence not only against some select few but against all creatures (Sarvabhuta) and thereby places before us a formidable challenge - both on the conceptual and practical levels - that we have not as yet met even remotely. All that we know about the transformative power that it entails is from the lives of a few exceptional individuals.

It is not easy to define a concept that is so profound, so encompassing, let alone to plan actions in a variety of contexts complying with this principle of Ahimsa, especially in the face of hostility and violence that seem to be part of our individual and collective lives. The Indic traditions, nonetheless, keep reminding us that it implies total avoidance of any kind of injury not only by deeds, but also in words and even in thoughts (Kaya-mana-vakya). The great philosophers of the ancient traditions of India – the Upanisadic, the Jaina and the Buddhist – highlight the idea by claiming it to be the highest of all virtues: 'Ahimsa paramo dharma'.

Numerous documents are available – from ancient to modern times - showing the depth, the power and the multi-dimensional character of this concept. Ahimsa as a value is not confined only in our relation to other human beings but also to all life that is non-human and even to the non-living aspects of Nature. Even in human affairs, its applicability is not restricted to what is described as

the ethico-religious spheres of our lives but is equally significant in the socio-political domain as well. The demand seems to be to keep on innovating tools of action that are in harmony with the spirit of non-violence in every sphere, in the face of all challenges – be that of political authority of dubious nature, or of that of oppressive religious orthodoxy, or in the case of any unjust social structure or unjustifiable violence against animals or that of environment.

Indeed, we hear from those - whom we believe to be authentic practitioners, and who have even engaged in the launching of non-violent rebellions against such menaces as imperialism, racism- that the pledge of non-violence excludes retaliation but not resistance. Their lives show that when compliance with the existing structures of authority is not possible on a number of grounds, non-violent non-co-operation can be a way out. Evidently, this itself is a practice that calls forth enormous courage while shunning any sense of fear or powerlessness. Above all, it is their leadership and conduct that help us to get a glimpse into what this principle of Ahimsa is really all about.

‘A man cannot practice Ahimsa and be a coward at the same time ‘ – said one such practitioner called Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, while launching a non-violent rebellion against the mighty forces of imperialism. Yet, the slogans that he used during the days of India’s struggle for independence were not geared toward a hate-campaign against the British. One such slogan that he tirelessly uttered was **‘Hate the system, do not hate the people’**, thereby highlighting a novel concept of revolution.

There are situations in our collective lives when what goes as legal in a certain context may morally be questionable, even simply as repugnant. Hence, the urgency of the day may well be to violate the law as did another practitioner of non-violence while launching a rebellion against the practice of racism.

Disavowing the legality of racism, he boldly says:

“Never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was legal.”

However, while he questions racism, we find him at the same time not allowing himself to forget his own deep conviction viz.

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that” – as we read in Martin Luther King’s A Testament of Hope.

We know that both of these practitioners met with violent death but nevertheless their conviction that stirred the world did not die with them. One astonishing lesson that we have learnt from them is that Ahimsa does work. We know for sure that the path that they have shown is one that demands a change of mind-set – the mind-set that living in a system of violence has brought forth and nurtured in us. It is high time to recognize that the religious traditions to which they adhered with much reverence and loyalty – be that Indic or Abrahamic – do in fact relentlessly work in order to alter that system of violence by seeking to transform us, despite our stubborn reluctance.

We watch with amazement that in this process, no violent means were either

recommended or used against those who were seen as the bearers of injustice and oppression and yet it seem to have the power to lift the participants to a spiritual plane. How else was resistance possible without retaliation even when the protestors suffered from gross physical abuse? We cannot but feel that this is a way of acting that carries with it a message of hope – a hope that perhaps unjust social structures can be altered and replaced by fair ones by not ceasing to engage in the process until mutual agreement is reached, that perhaps renewed relationships are possible if we do not allow ourselves to be obsessed by old enmities! Is it then realistic to expect that good sense may prevail so that finally there will be the readiness on our part in the near future to invest even a tiny fraction of the intellectual and economic resource that perpetuate the system of violence in which we live for promoting 'cross cultural conversation' with the view to transcend the hard boundaries of race, religion, ethnicity, gender and all that cause unrest by methods that are decidedly non-violent? If imperialism and racism could be fought, can then menaces like communalism, sexism and terrorism that are on the rise be overcome by bridging those gaps that divide the self from the other? Perhaps we will know the answers only when we dare to engage ourselves in such social experiments.

Indeed the Indic traditions, like all other thought traditions associated with the religions of the world, are repositories of ideas and attitudes for generating good will and friendship among all.

Buddhist thought, indeed, attempted to give Ahimsa a wider significance by forbidding all forms of Himsa to sentient beings and by encouraging a constant effort to remove the suffering of others, as expressed in the idea of Karuna or compassion. What is truly remarkable is the way these philosophers link the cognitive, the volitional and the emotional aspects of their enquiry into values. If the Buddhist thinkers have shown us why knowledge and compassion (Prajna & Karuna) are like two sides of the same coin by laying bare the idea of the unity of all beings (Samata- jnana); the proponents of Advaita Vedanta from the Upanisadic tradition made it transparent that what Advaita or non-duality is in theory, Ahimsa or non-violence is in practice by skillfully exposing the idea of Being as non-dual. Basing itself on Anekantavada, a metaphysical view that Reality is many-sided, Jainism has championed the cause of Ahimsa in full vigour, not only by openly condemning wanton cruelty to any creature but by making it mandatory in practice to avoid harming any kind of living creatures to the extent that is humanly possible.

However, for the sake of a deeper critical investigation on Ahimsa, let me add here that there is room for further discussion on how radically we can read the implications of the idea of non-violence in diverse contexts and to what extent we may consider this practice as a matter of our own choice, disposition, ability and commitment. Such queries are to be welcome. We are aware that there do exist records of controversy with regard to the limits of its feasibility in our daily life – personal and collective - and even of its utility in certain socio-political contexts. All these are worth a re-examination.

(Think of Martin Buber's open letter to Mahatma Gandhi re. Hitler)

However, the guiding principle recommended by these traditions is clear viz. to engage in this incessant striving to free ourselves from all forms of violence. There is no way of undermining the power and profundity of the idea of non-violence or denying the need for further exploring it with the view to let it shape our lives. Think of the thrust of the idea and its possible impact if even a little segment of it actually gets translated into action in a world where we daily witness case after case of human suffering which is undeniably man-made.

All these ideas that I am barely touching upon – moving from one Indic tradition to another - are elaborated in the philosophical and religious discourses, in mythologies and legends. Undoubtedly, we need to share some insights and similar concepts that make the conceptual worlds of different thought-traditions in the global context. Emphasis and analysis are of course likely to vary in their respective ethico-religious discourse.

It is high time for us to become aware of the overlaps that are there in the contents of such values as compassion, charity, love, kindness etc. that are considered to be of central importance in various religious traditions and notice what these have in common with the principle of Ahimsa. There is little doubt in my mind that the more we get to hear about the many renditions of these amazing concepts and of their transformational powers, the presence of religious diversity will be progressively more acknowledged as an invaluable cultural resource, as a veritable unifying and not as a divisive force. I have briefly referred to the three most ancient of the Indic traditions while hoping to hear from the exponents and practitioners present here about the rich contributions made by, for example, Sikhism, by the three great Abrahamic traditions, and from other sources which could be represented in this limited two-day conference.

We know that religious traditions differ from each other in terms of metaphysics and mythology, rituals and iconography and that these differences contribute toward their respective distinctiveness. However, how far these divergent narratives that are similar or dissimilar in intent will be clear only when we in collaboration will focus on their concerns, their recognition of norms and values and their aspirations for transforming our mortal existence. Our current situation demands the creation of opportunities that allow for greater participation in each other's tradition and a willingness on our part to unlearn our prejudices.

Let me now conclude by noting that to be a votary of non-violence is precisely to dare to challenge the ideological framework within which today the complex and variegated models of violence are conceived and carried out nationally and internationally. Generally speaking, the prevalent strategies capitalize on fear, anxiety, insecurity and suspicion that we cherish toward the otherness of the other. Effort seems to be deliberately directed against the employment of Ahimsa as a regulative principle for the mobilization of socio-political forces, perhaps also because economic as well as intellectual resources are readily available for the sustenance of this status quo. If inter-faith movement – which in principle could be the greatest source for harnessing support for the peace-

building initiatives - has not gathered momentum, it is largely because not enough investment has been made so far. Why so?

A Jewish thinker said the following words: "There is an assumption that you do not have to understand religion in order to understand the world. You need to understand politics, strategy, economics and law, but you do not need to understand religion. If you look at standard textbooks of international relations or the way we organize our foreign ministry, there is no place where a sophisticated understanding of religion as a public force in the world is dealt with".

In other words, we still have not fully appreciated the fact, which was evident to the great progenitor of the interfaith movement, Swami Vivekananda, who said that **'Of all the forces that has shaped human destiny, the most powerful is the one the manifestation of which we call religion'**.

At the end, I am tempted to observe that eventually, our collective success in this endeavor – if and when it happens - will unmistakably signal the dawning of a new phase of human civilization.

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