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Ahimsa : A Yoga Perspective on Non-Violence

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Ahimsa, non-violence, is the first of the Yamas. It is referred to as the Mother of all virtues and is the base for all the subsequent Yamas and Niyamas exposed by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. It is probably also the most popular or fashionable of the Yamas. Indeed, when one talks about Yoga, or even India in general, what pops up in the mind of people is the idea or the ideal of Ahimsa. This may be linked to Gandhiji's important influence. So, Ahimsa is the mother of all virtues and the "pop star" amongst them. What a glamorous Yama to think about !!!

But popularity and glamour have a price. Usually we do not give a second look or thought to the things we think we already know. And if on top they are glamorous, we often remain on a very superficial level, on the level of fascination concerning them. The glamorous concepts are used as the jewels we adorn ourselves with. We even sometimes use them to turn our "vices into virtues", as the French would say, by legitimizing our actions by their invocation. We may also idealize them so much, that we would sacrifice everything for them ... But no real deepening of their meaning is involved ... no attempt of real understanding.

May it be that there are hidden dimensions in Ahimsa ?? May it be that Gandhiji's so influential interpretation of Ahimsa was not the final word on it ?? May it be that there is a different way of looking at the often repeated saying to turn the other cheek when one is slapped ?? May it be that sometimes it is Ahimsa itself that calls for violence ?? Could it even be that Ahimsa may have a violent nature ?? What is the relationship between Himsa, violence and Ahimsa, non-violence ?? How to understand it ?? How to work with it ?? How to translate Ahimsa into a skill in action in our lives ?? How is it related to the spiritual path ?? And why have some of the most important spiritual teachings for every Yogi, the ones given by Krishna to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, been imparted

on a battlefield ?? And why are they actually even pushing a reluctant Arjuna, to go and fight his enemies ... who are actually all his family and friends ??

On his guest lecture in Ananda Ashram on 6th November 2008, Dr. Basavaraddi from the National Yoga Institute in Delhi, made an interesting observation : we can only really practice Ahimsa if we have attained Samadhi. I would add that a complete understanding of Ahimsa and its realization in practice would actually also lead us there. We will illustrate this idea in the following pages. Meanwhile, let us just point out that the practice of Ahimsa calls for perfect Kriya Yoga, a perfect practice of Tapas, discipline, Swadhyaya, Self study and Ishwara Pranidhana, surrender to the divine will or the higher Self, which according to Patanjali is a path sufficient to attain Samadhi if perfected. Really understanding Ahimsa also entails to really understand Himsa and their interplay in the cosmic dance. It demands to understand Yoga, Union. On a basic level the ideal of non harming springs from the intuition that we are all fundamentally related. We are all one. All we do to “ourselves”, we also do to “others”. This intuition must be deepened more and more until Samadhi is attained and until we thus become fundamentally non violent as we become one with “what is”, with Sat, with “reality”. We may start to feel a little dizzy by the vast horizon that is opening up before our eyes.

So let us ground ourselves a little by rooting our reflexions in more down to earth experience. And let us allow ourselves to be intrigued, to start to wonder, to unsettle our certitudes. Let us allow to be puzzled by Ahimsa and its paradoxes. Let us dare to face them ... it may be worth the journey.

Ahimsa is a Yama that is very dear to me. I have indeed been intrigued for a long time by the question of Shanti, Peace, which is closely related to it. The question for me was not only a philosophical one, but an existential one as I embody a living paradox : I love Peace ... and I love martial arts ... I have started to practice martial arts when I was six or seven. But the older I grew – and especially as I started to teach Karate Do to children, the more I had to face a dilemma. I love these arts and it is said that they are *Do* (the Japanese version of the Chinese *Dao*, in some way an equivalent to the Indian *Dharma*), ways, paths of self knowledge and self perfection, spiritual paths. How to reconcile the idea of a spiritual path that ought to be rooted in Ahimsa with paths that explicitly deal with violence, with fighting ?? Of course you can always try to water down the fighting aspect and solve the dilemma by saying that they teach to fight only in order to defend oneself etc. But still : let us face it – they are about fighting. On a very concrete, down to earth level, how is it possible that a Swords Master – who is supposed to have attained a high level of spiritual attainment, and maybe ultimate Ahimsa – could just cut an opponent into two ?? Isn't that

a spiritual impossibility ?? And what about more worldly examples, such as the use of violence by the police or by the army for example ?? It may not always be justified, but sometimes it is necessary to act “violently” in order to, maintain general non-violence, harmony or *dharma*. It seems that sometimes violence must be done to our violence. But the question is which violence should counter which violence ?? Is “violence” just one thing ?? Is non-violence just one thing ?? Are they opposed ?? Are they complementary ?? Do they constitute a polarity ?? Discrimination, Viveka, is needed to address these points.

Let me tell a little story that will provide a framework for our further reflexions. Once upon a time there was a mighty warrior who had defeated all the Swords Masters in his country. On his travels, he heard about the fame of one very great Master who was said to live alone in a mountain. The Swordsman decided to try to find this Master to see if he was really so great. His plan was to challenge him in a duel to test his skills. And if it showed that the Master was really as powerful as said and if he didn’t die in the duel, he would ask him to become his disciple. So the warrior set out on his journey. After many days of travel through the forests and the mountains he finally reached the master’s hut. He saw an old man standing there and enquired if he was the famous master. As a reply the master asked him who he was.

- I am a great Samurai, a great warrior, undefeated in combat, and I think I can say the greatest swordsman the world has ever seen.
- What ?? You are a Samurai ?? Have you seen what you look like ?? You are dirty, uncalmed. You look ridiculous. And what’s this thing pending on your side ?? Is that supposed to be a sword ?? Hahaha ... Ridiculous !!!

After a few more of these comments, the Samurai could not take it anymore. He drew his sword and was about to lower it on the Master’s head to cut him into two. The Master stayed calm and raised his finger :

- Here open the gates of Hell, he said.

Although in a rage, the Samurai was somehow struck by this reaction, held back his blow and withdrew the sword in its sheath.

- Here open the doors of heaven, said the Master.

This story reveals many teachings on Ahimsa. Let us look at it from three different angles and let us then ponder on the implications of what these different readings of the story teach us.

1) On a first, most obvious level, the story seems to tell us that “violence is bad and non-violence is good”. We have to learn to restrain (Yama) our animal nature and its instincts. If we let our

aggressive instincts take over, we pave the road to hell. What else is hell than a state characterized by ongoing intense violence, a place where there is no space for conscious action? Every stimulus triggers an automatic reaction and we get caught up in a never ending circle of violence. Such a state is also characterized by the preponderance of instinctive action over self-conscious action. Thus Ahimsa starts when we get aware of the violence of our actions and when we start to restrain them, when we start to pull back our sword. Symbolically speaking, this sword can be the punch we were about to throw at somebody's nose, it can also be holding back the abuse we were about to shout at someone, or even the mean look we were about to give someone. The gates of heaven start to open when we start to replace unconscious by conscious actions, when we introduce some space between perceived stimuli and our reactions. If somebody shouts at us makes us angry and we immediately shout back or raise our hand to hit him, we are actually identified with the anger. We are the anger. There is no space anymore in the situation. But when we manage to develop a minimum of awareness, we may not be able to control the anger and the instinctive raising of the hand – but we may be able to witness it, to introduce some space between our action, our emotion and our consciousness. And thus we can draw back our hand, like the Samurai who drew back his sword. It should be noted that although still having many things to learn, the Samurai had already attained a certain level of awareness – indeed, he was able to become aware of the situation although he was initially carried away by his animal instincts. We see already here, that if external restraint is necessary to start to tread the path of Ahimsa ... it calls for consciousness, for awareness. And in order to move on the path of Ahimsa ever increasing awareness is needed. But this should not downplay the role of external Ahimsa.

At the beginning stages, our understanding and practice of Ahimsa can only be developed if we have a measure to evaluate our actions. We must start by putting the maxim “Do not harm.” into action into a quite straightforward way to start with, if we really want to be able to understand this Yama. Let us illustrate this point through what seems to be an eternal question of aspirants on the spiritual path, an evergreen discussion topic on Ashram and spiritual life : should one kill mosquitoes ?? Is “not killing mosquitoes” not against Ahimsa, as if we do not kill them, they harm us ?? Isn't there some justification to harm what may harm us ?? Well, I guess we need some common sense here. Of course, we should not allow others (animals or humans) to destroy ourselves under the pretext of Ahimsa. But at an initial level, it may be nice to contemplate the idea of not killing the mosquitoes that are biting us. Indeed, normally justifying our killing of mosquitoes is just a rationalization, a legitimization of our instinctive reaction. How many of us kill a mosquito consciously ?? Are we not just hitting at it when we feel it, without further thought, just because it bothers us ?? Do we really evaluate each time to what extent the mosquito is a threat to

us, to what extent we may be able to give him some of our blood or not etc ?? Similarly in a first phase, we may also just allow people to scold us unjustly. We may thus learn that it is actually possible to be the one who disarms in a given situation and that this attitude may actually permit to pacify many situations that would stay “toxic” if we kept on trying to find the one to blame or to prove our respective points. It may also teach us that – sometimes at least – criticism is justified and that we may have invited it in one way or another. But it may also little by little dawn on us that such a “non-violent” attitude is not always the solution. So the Yama, the restraint of Ahimsa, if we take it seriously, little by little makes us aware of the paradoxes of Ahimsa, of its interference with other Yamas and Niyamas. And we may come to a point where we consciously decide that killing a mosquito or punching somebody in a given circumstance is right – but this leads us to the second aspect highlighted in the story : the gates of heaven start when the light of consciousness starts to shine, when we start to leave our animal, Pashu, bound nature behind and become human beings, Manusha, beings endowed with Manas, with consciousness.

2) Becoming conscious makes the whole question of Ahimsa much more complex. It is not only about not hurting others through our explicit aggressiveness which gets quite easy to identify once one has started to follow out a basic self discipline of Ahimsa as outlined above. We also have to introspect (Swadyaya) in order to get ever clearer about our more or less conscious or unconscious motivation for action. It is not only what we do to others that may be violent. We can also be violent to ourselves, to our environment. And we may be violent not only through deeds, but even through our feelings and thoughts. Ultimately every single thought we think, every feeling we have, bears consequences on ourselves and on others. The Swadyaya linked to Ahimsa demands to analyze the consequences of our thoughts, feelings and actions upon ourselves, our environment, others in short term, but also long term perspective. We also have to broaden our horizon and become more and more aware not only of ourselves but of the whole situation we find ourselves in and of its interconnexions.

Let us start to illustrate a first aspect of introspection. Let us ask ourselves : How do we act with ourselves and with others in our daily life ?? When we criticize people, do we do it for the sake of improving a situation in the form of constructive criticism, or is it just an outlet of some accumulated aggressiveness ?? Where does this aggressiveness come from ?? May we be partly responsible for it ?? For example, have we been partying too much and not sleeping enough thus being overtired and therefore more easily irritable ?? In situations that do not work out the way we want, do we always look for someone to blame ?? If yes, why ?? Is it not also possible that sometimes we are to blame, or even that nobody is to blame ?? Where does this – not so rare –

feeling come from that the whole world is a big battle field and our life a battle that starts anew every morning when we get up ?? Isn't this attitude already a sign of a basic aggressiveness that follows us through the day and maybe even informs our whole lives ?? Is it not possible to start the day with a personal disarmament – looking forward to what it will bring, and opening up to it ?? By doing so we may little by little be able to “disarm our lives”. To practice Ahimsa one should have attained Samadhi said Dr. Basavaraddi. Indeed, on a very fundamental level is Himsa, violence, not the child of Avidya, of non-knowledge, of ignorance ?? Right at the moment where “I” is born, where duality emerges in consciousness between a perceiver and the perceived, the world potentially becomes a battle : to fight in order to get what we find pleasurable, to protect ourselves from the unpleasurable. The bigger the “I” becomes, the more aggressive we become as the world appears more and more external to us and our consciousness of being linked with it diminishes. Our condition becomes more and more claustrophobic and we may come to a point where we may not even be aware anymore of our surroundings, of our fellow human beings and all the other creatures surrounding us. So it seems that the basic violence haunting us, is that of fundamental Avidya, of identifying with a self that forgets the Self, our non-dual connection to the whole. Violence is a state closely linked to the absence of space, to the absence of consciousness. The yardstick to measure our Ahimsa may be to always check if what we are doing, thinking, feeling is directed towards opening up or towards closing down. As soon as we perceive that we are on the closing down slope, we can be sure that Himsa is not far away. Indeed each time we are closing ourselves up, each time we are shutting ourselves off reality, we become more violent. Let us take two examples, one more physical, one more relational which will also introduce the notion that Swadyaya necessary to achieve Ahimsa cannot be confined to “oneself” but has to open to the larger picture of the surrounding situation.

It is interesting to observe that many people who practice “Yoga” instead of growing spiritually, of getting healthy mentally, emotionally and physically actually hurt themselves. They injure their backs, their joints etc. I have even met people who as a result of Yoga Saddhana became more “speed”, more aggressive than they were before ... Some become more intolerant ... This should make us think. How is this possible ?? In my opinion, it is linked to a lack of Ahimsa, of non-harming in their Yogic approach. It is certainly not by pure chance that Patanjali listed Ahimsa as the first of the Yamas and thus as the basis of all Yogic life. The active counterpart of the passive restraint of non harming is to open up. If Yoga Sadhana is deeply rooted in Ahimsa, in its passive and active aspects of non-harming and opening up, it cannot lead to injury but only to ever increasing awareness and surrender to Being, or Ishawara Pranidhana. The important things are not the performance of the Asanas, of the Pranayamas and of all the other diverse Yogic practices and

Sadhanas. All these are only tools to disarm, and to open up to ourselves and to our Selves. Hurting ourselves or others in our practices shows either a lack of awareness – which means that we were too caught up in our “I” to hear the messages of our surroundings : our knees are already hurting but we keep on mistreating them because we have decided that we want to sit in a perfect Padma Asana at the end of the month. Or we were so caught up in our “I” that what just discard the messages we received. “I want”, “I want” ... whatever the consequences may be. It is interesting to note that in such an approach we also find the fundamental duality I mentioned above. There is “I” and this external thing “Padma Asana” that “I” wants to achieve. So this “I”, which is not our Self and is thus also external to us, uses all his will and might to achieve another thing which is external to us and that we call “Padma Asana”. One projection chases another ... an the chase gets more and more violent and causes more and more collateral damage until we are injured enough to be unable to continue. This is certainly not “skill in action”, as Swamiji defines Yoga. There is no space to listen to what is going on, no space for awareness ... it is the “road to hell”.

We find similar situations in our relationships with others. We see ourselves as separate entities and the others as “others”. And we start to play all kinds of games with them. Here also we can distinguish different kinds of Himsa based on our different trappings in the “I”. If we are so caught up in our problems, in our projects, or in our self admiration, we may not even be aware of others. We may keep on bumping into people on the streets. We may step on their toes. We can do this physically but not only. We can also emotionally or mentally bump into people or step on their toes by saying harsh words to them, or even by just ignoring them. Then we can be violent, in a conscious manner. We do not like somebody and so we feel justified to use Himsa against him. And we may also be violent as a result of our fundamental Avidya, of our fundamental insecurity stemming from our identification with duality. We feel we must help others, save the world etc. But maybe the others or the world do not need or do not want our help. Although clothed in nice justifications, often even “doing good” is just an expression of basic aggressivity, which we could maybe define as the basic thrust to “go out”. “Going out” means leaving the center. It means leaving consciousness, leaving oneness, for the periphery. The further “out” we are, the more “closed we become” and the more “aggressive” our life becomes. So, in order to really understand and practice Ahimsa, we may have to return to the center, raise the veil of duality, recognize the Maya of Avidya. Return from “going out” to Being. This leads us to the third lesson to be learned from the story.

3) Until now we have looked at the teachings of the story from the point of view of the Samurai, the “student”. For him it is the lessons of restraining violent actions and increasing awareness that are

paramount. But what about the Master ?? It is said in the Yoga Sutras that the one who attains perfection in Ahimsa has the power to subdue all violence or animosity in his presence. So a first way of reading the story, would be to remark that the Master did not even have to draw his sword. His reaction to almost being slain, was just to say “Here open the gates of hell.” And the warrior withdrew his sword. A profound disarmament of ourselves roots us in Reality, in Sat. This opens up completely new, unexpected, possibilities for action. From a “normal” perspective, there seemed to be only two options for the Master : either run away if he did not want to fight, or fight back. He did neither. He remained. But instead of retaliating, “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, he “presented the other cheek”. He did not reply to the animal nature of the warrior with his own animal nature. He did not instinctively fight back. He did not even react in a “human” way, if we see this as a way informed by conscious, but still I-based action. Indeed, considering his skill, he could probably have either killed, or, more gently, disarmed his opponent – thus proving his superior skill to himself and to the warrior. But this too he did not do. Indeed, his reaction came from his higher Self, not from his limited self. He showed his other cheek, his other side, his divine nature. He could have harmed, but he didn’t – which is real Ahimsa : refraining from the use of personal power; which first of all implies that you do possess some. He acted as an ambassador of Reality. The warrior needed to learn something, the master was there and the teaching happened.

On an ultimate level, Ahimsa leads to Aparigraha, Ishwara Pranidhana and basically Samadhi. Indeed, while disarming the ever more subtle manifestations of Himsa, we develop Aparigraha, non-greed, non attachment to our limited existence and we replace it little by little by Ishwara Pranidhana, which I would like to render here as “being an ambassador of Reality”. The lesser our “I” becomes, the more the veils of Avidya, of the fundamental ignorance, of the dualistic fallacy, are removed. Ultimate freedom, Samadhi is achieved. Having ceased the identification with our limited “selves”, the Self can shine. Our action becomes entirely free and entirely appropriate to any given circumstance. As Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov, a Christian Master, once put it : the more we identify with God, the more we become free. Indeed God – or Reality – is the only one to be free. The further we are removed from it, the more we identify ourselves with our limitations, with our periphery, the more bound we are. The more we return to our center, the more we disarm our aggressive projections of “I” and duality, the more we incarnate Ahimsa, and ultimately Sat, Being.

It should be noted that in this perspective, the conventional assessment of behaviour does not hold anymore. In the particular context of this story, the Master’s action was appropriate because the Samurai was ready to get moved by the teaching. In another context, with a less aware opponent, the Master may have cut him into two. But not out of aggressiveness or violence. But just because,

reality is what it is. There are rules and natural laws. And on some level, foolishness is not tolerated. As Swamiji used to point out : “you cannot break the law, you can only break yourself over the law”. If you do not have awareness, you may have to learn through hard knocks. If you are so caught up in your aggressivity that you do not perceive the world anymore, you may have to be cut down, to bring home the point that you are an open and vulnerable, non-eternal entity that has to learn to open up to the world, to Life, to the Self, to Sat. The Master is but an ambassador of reality – he is not acting on the base of the “I”. He just performs his role, his natural function of serving as a mirror of Reality. Or rather, he lets this role, this function being performed. As is said in the Bhagavad Gita, “One fixed in equanimity (Yoga) also called Sama Bhava, frees oneself from virtue and vice” – he is not bound any more by conventional morality, but is an agent of “cosmic law”.

This last reflexion is puzzling because it confronts us to the idea that there is no violence or non-violence as such. There may be cases where “violence” can be justified to counter “violence”. Others where it may not be so. Basically, after having tread the basic path of Ahimsa, the question seems to become more and more “Do we act for our own personal, limited reasons ??”, which will be always tainted by Himsa, violence – or “Do we act to open up to Reality and to tune into it ??”, which is the practice of Ahimsa. Whatever limits our “I”, our limited, inferior nature will be perceived as violence by it. So the thrive towards Samadhi will be perceived as violent by the “lower self”. Inversely whatever limits our “higher Self” will be perceived as violent by it. At some point we need to make a choice of the path we want to tread. But the two paths are not equal. One leads to suffering for oneself and for others, the other to Sat Chit Ananda – Being, Consciousness and Bliss – and to Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram – Truth, Goodness and Beauty. If we choose the Yogic path, we may little by little also become more skilful in “non-violent” personal disarmament, and our life may start to be more attuned, more beautiful, more conscious, more peaceful, even before attaining the final goal.

But it appears clearly that on the way, there is no simple ready for use recipe for following Ahimsa ... neither is there for any other of the Yamas or Niyamas. As shown in these few pages, the assessment of Ahimsa is eminently situational : and it is not only the external actions, but also the motivation, the “spiritual level” of those involved etc. that have to be taken into consideration. Ahimsa is but a guideline, the polar star guiding us on our spiritual journey. It sets a direction but we have to rediscover it and actualize it anew incessantly like little children who rediscover the world at each moment. Through the practice of Ahimsa, we may again become able to wonder and to marvel. We may little by little become innocent and non-harmful again and start enjoying instead of chasing the world ... and Reality.