

# Nonviolence for All

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When I was an eighteen year old Jain monk, I read the autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi. I felt that as a monk I was concerned with personal nonviolence. But Gandhi had made personal nonviolence go a bit further and extended it into social, political and ecological nonviolence. Of course the roots of social, political, and ecological nonviolence are all there in the Jain philosophy. But in practice we Jains have become too centered on personal nonviolence. Influenced by Gandhi, I wanted to extend nonviolence in to social, political and ecological spheres. So I remain a Jain, although no longer a monk and I continue my quest on the path of holistic nonviolence. I do so because I believe that the Jain philosophy is dynamic rather than static dogma.

My life as a monk was only a beginning, not the end of the journey. For example, you put a small seedling in a little container because a small seedling cannot withstand the cold weather, the wind, and the storm outside in the fields. So as a good gardener you put the seedling in a small pot. When the seedling becomes a big and strong plant then you need to put the plant in the field to become a tree. If you always keep the plant in the pot, it will never become a full tree. May be it will remain as a bonsai tree but if you want a dynamic and natural tree you have to put the seedling out in the field.

I am deeply grateful to my Guru and teacher, acaarya Tulsi. The foundation of my life was laid out by him under a protective

and secure environment. From him I learned the basic principles of Jainism. But then an urge came into my heart and I felt it was time to go in the wilderness—go out in the field and out of that beautiful, secure, loving, caring and protective environment of the monastic order.

A Jain monk is called a "*muni*." The word "*muni*" means a person who keeps *maunam* or silence. It is believed that when Mahāvīra gave his first sermon sitting under the tree, he sat in silence. Animals, birds, angels and humans – all came for this great event, and they all understood the message of Mahāvīra in their own language. Mahāvīra was not using any words since he was the "*mahāmuni*." So *munis* keep silence and communicate their message through living and through setting example. The lay people, in Jain tradition, are called *Śrāvakas* (male) and *Śrāvikas* (female). The word "*Śrāvaka*" means a person who listens. Isn't this a wonderful situation: the teacher is silent and the student is listening. So, when we go for *darśana* of our guru, we don't have to talk to him, we just go to see him. *Darśana* means seeing – not merely through the two eyes which see things superficially but seeing through the eye of the heart, the eye of imagination, which we call the "third eye." We go to the temple for *darśana* and sit there in the presence of the sacred image. This is one of the finest examples of nonviolence where even words are unnecessary, because there is risk that the words could be misunderstood or may hurt someone.

As a *muni* you keep a *mukhapattikā* (a cloth strip covering the mouth). This is to remind you that you need to speak only when you must, speak as little as you can, and think three times what you want to say and speak only if it is appropriate. Or your words may fall on a barren ground. You do this because you want to avoid violence, and the worst kind of violence is the violence of speech. The language of the politicians is often violent. Such language causes wars. Wars start in our minds and in our speech. Only later we send the big bombers to the battlefields. So politicians should learn to practice silence, and they should learn

what to speak, how to speak and when to speak. This is a great contribution of Jain religion to the world.

I am reminded of a story. One day the Mughal emperor Akbar asked his prime minister, Birbal, What is the sweetest thing in the world? Birbal replied: My lord, words are the sweetest and the words are the bitterest. Akbar did not believe this. How can words be sweet or bitter, he thought and dismissed the idea. A few days later, to prove his point, Birbal invited the empress for dinner at his house. When she was leaving his house, after a sumptuous dinner, Birbal instructed his servants to clean off after the queen, using swear words and bad language. The empress overheard the words of insult and was shocked to learn that Birbal thought of her in such a negative way. She felt deeply wounded. When she returned to her palace she complained to the emperor about the abusive incident. This was very hard for the emperor to believe. The next day, he summoned the prime minister. When Birbal arrived, Akbar asked him: How dare you insult my wife using swear words? Birbal replied: My lord, you said words are neither sweet nor bitter, so how can they cause harm or discomfort? How can words hurt the empress?

Nonviolence, therefore, begins with our words and in our minds. The words are the first external expression of our thoughts. When we write books and articles we are told that we should be honest and critical. We should say what we think of other people and their works. But in the Jain tradition we think otherwise. We put nonviolence of thought and speech on top of our practice. If you want to practice nonviolence in your family, with your colleagues or business associates then making the use of appropriate language would be a good start. Imagine the violence language can cause. The breakups of marriages leading to bitter court cases always start with violent language. If we examine carefully, we will find that all quarrels are rooted in the breakdown of communication and/or use of abusive language. Therefore, if we can practice nonviolence of speech, then many of our family quarrels, disputes among nations and conflicts among parties and religious sects will be considerably reduced, if not

disappear altogether. So let us practice nonviolence in our speech: speak less, think what we are going to say, and how we are going to say it. This may be the first step toward a nonviolent world order.

I speak about nonviolence because I personally witnessed the events of September 11, 2001. That evening I was due to give a public lecture in New York Open Center. I was staying close to the twin towers of the World Trade Center in Greenwich Village. That morning I was woken up by the loud noise of emergency vehicles. We could not figure out what was going on. Then we got a call from my friend's wife asking us to put the television on, which we did. We could not believe what we saw on the television screen. So we went outside. We were only a 10-15 blocks from the location. As we stood there on the Seventh Avenue, we saw a plane come over the second tower, went around the tower and then pierced through it. We were shocked. Lots of people gathered on the street. The traffic stopped. We were all speechless. People were hugging each other. We saw people jumping off from the windows of the twin towers. A few minutes later, we saw the two towers collapse. I went to the Open Center that afternoon. Of course the meeting was cancelled. We decided to put a notice outside as a gesture of nonviolence. The notice invited those who needed help or counseling. About 25 people came and we talked.

I tell you this story in the context of nonviolence. As a Jain, who has dedicated his whole life to nonviolence. First as a monk, and later going around the world for peace, walking like a Jain monk from India to America without a penny – totally without money. Just going from door to door and village to village and depending on the goodwill and hospitality of the people. I walked, along with a friend, about 8000 miles to promote the principles of nonviolence. Then witnessing the criminal violence of September 11 was devastating. You can imagine my situation. My entire body was saturated with feelings of nonviolence. Seeing such catastrophe made nonviolence even more urgent. I feel that September 11 has changed or should change our lives.

The question is, In what ways are we going to change? Are we going to create a culture of nonviolence where violence, attack, wars and killings become a taboo, and where we are never prepared to take the route of violence?

If we analyze history, we will recognize the fact that events are never isolated. September 11 did not happen out of the blue, without any cause or reason. Why this happened here? Are there seeds of this event in the Gulf war or in some other war? America is the most powerful country in the world. It is now the only Super Power. America is strong not just militarily but also financially. America is also blessed with intelligence and cultures, with science and technology, with literature and poetry. There is so much wisdom in this country. America is also blessed with tremendous landscape: forests, desserts, animals, flowers, rivers and mountains. What a wonderful country it is. Can this country show a new way? Can America show the way of nonviolence? Remember, nonviolence is the way of the brave and the strong, not of the cowards and the weak.

America cannot stand alone. We have to move from "I" to "Us" and "Me" to "We." We live in the same one world, on the same planet Earth – our home. If ever there was an urgent message it is the message of one earth. If Americans were to stand together with the world, then we can create a beautiful world, a world without violence.

We must recognize that hunger is also violence, starvation is also violence. If people are dying of starvation, the world cannot be at peace. In Jain tradition we say there are 8.4 million species (*Jiva yoni*). We humans on this earth are only one of the 8.4 million species. This is the humility of the Jains. The 8.4 million species minus the humans live and die, and they never try to wage wars. Therefore, we have to thank them. We humans wage wars, not they. Elephants, snakes, tigers or any of the other 8.4 million species except humans, have never produced the nuclear bomb. So we must be humble. We must try not to be too clever. Our cleverness may be our weakness. Our humility may be our strength.

Jain tradition is a non-dualistic tradition. We are all connected and we stand together in relation to one another. We cannot exist by ourselves. So America and rest of the world cannot stay separate. "The West and the Rest" has been the slogan of some western thinkers, business leaders and politicians. The superior West and the inferior rest. They are trying to globalize western values: everyone must drink coca cola, eat MacDonald's, wear blue jeans, watch Hollywood films showing naked bodies in the bed with sex scenes and then tell a Muslim that this is the culture of liberty which you should be adopting. This is not the globalization we want. What we do want is the globalization of love, of nonviolence, of peace.

The title of my new book is "You are therefore I am." This is in contrast to Rene Descartes, the French philosopher, who said: "I think, therefore, I am." "I" not "We." I think in my head in isolation and therefore I am. So America stands alone. My family stands alone. I stand alone. This is the cult of individualism. It is this cult which gives birth to consumerism and selfishness.

In nonviolence we all live together and depend on each other. When we are violent to others, we are violent to ourselves. When we are attacking others, we are attacking ourselves. Nonviolence is not a matter of convenience. I will talk to my friend – but can I talk to my enemy? Can I listen to people who are in disagreement with me? Can I ask them, Why are you so angry? What have I done to you my brothers and sisters that you are ready to kill yourself? Have I damaged you in anyway? Have I offended you? It is very easy for a strong country like the United States to go and bomb a weak country. But talking to an enemy requires real strength and courage.

In the Jain tradition we have a figure of Mahababubali, who is regarded great symbol of power and strength. He was fighting with his brother Bharat with a sword. So angry was he that he lifted his arm with the naked sword to kill Bharat. Then he paused and asked himself, What am I doing? Is this my real strength? What satisfaction will this give me? Then and there he

stopped. He killed his ego and anger instead of killing his brother. He removed hair from his head and renounced the world. The event transformed his life. Near Bangalore there is a big statue of Bahubali. We should celebrate his legacy of great courage not to kill but to overcome ego and anger.

Mahāvīra is a super example of nonviolence. He grew up as a prince. He had all the power, wealth and comfort. But he decided to leave these behind and go with a begging bowl. There is a great message in this renunciation of power and affluence for us and for the world. The modern democracies encourage us to seek power. It is believed that only through acquisition of political power we can help others. Therefore, individuals and parties spend millions of dollars to gain power. But Mahāvīra was born to rule. He was given the opportunity to do good by governing and controlling others. Yet, he renounced power, wealth and the material world. Goodness, virtues, service, compassion and peace cannot be imposed from top down. These qualities have to grow from the bottom of our hearts, every one's hearts. So Mahāvīra advocated spiritual democracy. He worked for social change through personal purification and transformation of the soul. By renouncing political power he gained spiritual power. There is a powerful lesson here for modern democracies which have become power hungry and corrupt. So much is their concern for power that it must be maintained at any cost and defended with weapons of mass destruction and other violent means. Mahāvīra teaches us to serve rather than to rule.

Now the Jains need to wake up. We have been sleeping for too long and keeping nonviolence to ourselves as if it is too precious so keep it confined. We need to communicate the message of nonviolence actively in political, social, ecological domains. In Jain tradition, ahimsā (nonviolence) and *anekānta* (multiple truths) go together, like two legs of a human being. There is no one truth but many truths. It is like the great garden of Eden, the humanity and the world are diverse—we have the black people, the white people, the yellow people, the dancing

people, the singing people, the tall people, and the small people. Similarly, there are other living beings who walk, crawl, swim or fly. This is biodiversity. Twenty-six centuries ago, Mahāvīra celebrated the diversity of life—diversity of truths and diversity of philosophy. We must not narrow it down in some kind of dogmatic ideology.

Let us move forward. Let us see how *ahiṃsā* and *anekānta* can be a guiding principles for the twenty-first century, not just a luxury for the few, but guiding principles for all.