

Chapter 1 from *The Nonviolent Revolution*.

Compassion: The Way of Planetary Healing

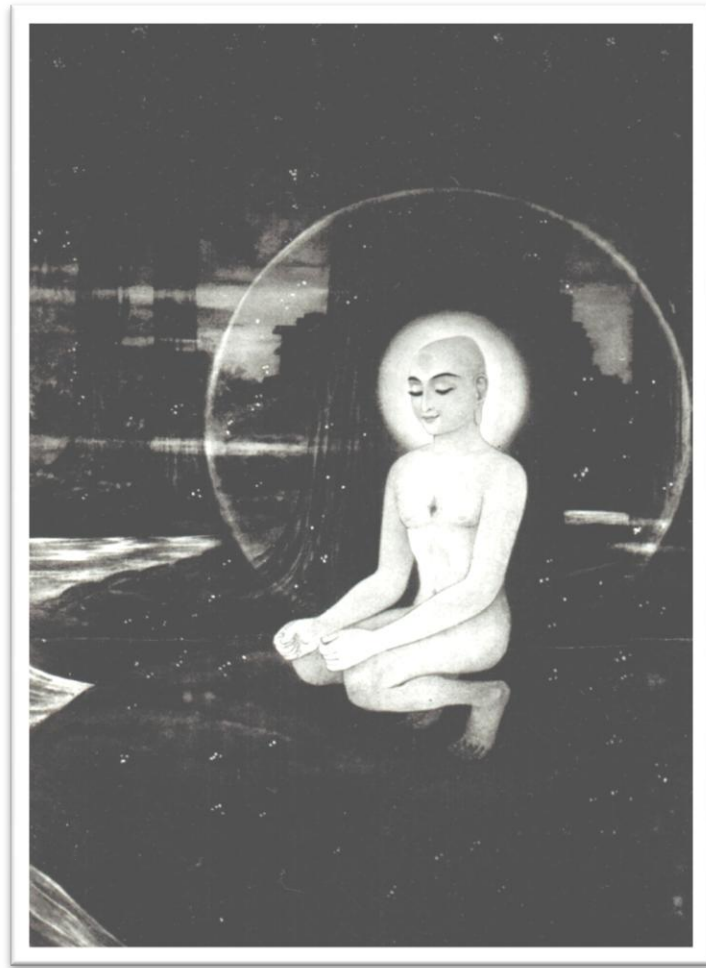


Ahiṃsā paramo dharma.
(*Ahimsa is the highest duty.*)
-Padma Purana I.31.27

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, people the world over have sought to experience dynamic compassion (ahimsa) as an inherent, living, active expression of our innate goodness, of the God within. The term ahimsa (pronounced ə'him,sā) comes from the Sanskrit, and has long been defined in the East as “non-injury” or “non-killing.” When viewed in a more Western context, it means “dynamic harmlessness” or more properly “dynamic compassion.” This definition would not only encompass the renunciation of the will to kill or the intention to hurt any other living being through hostile thought, word or deed, but involves the conscious integration of compassion into every aspect of daily life.

Though the concept of ahimsa was spoken of in what is now India by Lord Mahavira (599-527 B.C.E.), Gautama Buddha (566-486 B.C.E.) and in China by Lao Tzu (sixth century B.C.E.), the doctrine of compassion was also taught by Jesus Christ and the Apostles. The essential doctrine of ahimsa has also been taught under a variety of labels by philosophers, political activists, scholars, scientists and religious leaders, including Henry David Thoreau, Sojourner Truth, Thomas Merton, M.K. Gandhi, Sir Bertrand Russell, Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., The Dalai Lama, Robert Thurman, Peace Pilgrim and Rev. Matthew Fox.

It is also a major aspect of most indigenous cultures. For example, Native Americans, despite apparently having had little contact with the rest of the world, evolved a highly sophisticated planetary view based on the oneness of life and a deep respect for all members of the planetary family, including humans, other animals, plants, mountains and streams. Writing in *The Quest* magazine, Robert “Medicine Grizzlybear” Lake, a traditional Native American healer and ceremonial leader said, “Mother Earth is not only becoming polluted, but is also becoming weak and very sick... If she dies, we all die. It's as simple as that.”



Lord Mahavira

Ahimsa: A Philosophy for the Strong

The term ahimsa has long been misinterpreted in the West. Usually, the terms “passive resistance” and “nonviolence” have been seen as being equivalent to ahimsa, with “non-resistance to evil” following close behind. This has led many to view ahimsa as a wimpy, impotent way of dealing with violence in the world.

For many Westerners, ahimsa is an exotic term which brings to mind an image of a monk sitting on a Himalayan mountaintop- a quiet, isolated existence far removed from the challenges, conflicts and choices to be made in the day-to-day world. Others, who focus on its image of passivity, have viewed the practice of ahimsa as an avoidance of taking a stand in the face of danger or evil. Charges of “sitting by while your grandmother is being beaten” or “doing nothing while your country is being attacked by terrorists” are sometimes presented to illustrate this belief.

Ahimsa has also been criticized as being a dogmatic and absolutist doctrine, allowing little flexibility in its application. The image of permitting a swarm of locusts to lay waste to productive farmland out of compassion (for the locusts) is one example of this point of view; sparing the life of a terrorist who is plotting to murder dozens of people with a plastic explosive is another. Closely allied with this absolutist view is that the aspirant to a compassionate life is forced to adhere to a specific doctrine imposed by some outer authority- a situation that can only produce conformity, rigidity and fear.

On the other hand, some critics consider ahimsa to be a vague, sentimental and highly impractical philosophy, to be practiced by special people to a limited degree under ideal circumstances. The possibility that a “normal” human being living in Lower Manhattan, a refugee camp in Ramallah, or a suburb of Medellín can practice ahimsa on a daily basis is regarded as a most unlikely and even absurd idea.

Dynamic and All-Encompassing

Actually, the true significance and scope of ahimsa is far removed from these perceptions. The teachings of dynamic compassion represent the essence of appreciation and reverence for life to be applied in every facet of daily existence, and represent a deep involvement in daily life and its challenges. Rather than merely a passive state of refraining from violence, ahimsa implies the active expression of compassion. It not only encompasses our philosophical attitudes towards war and peace, but directly impacts our daily interactions with family, friends, colleagues and neighbors; the way we earn a living and how we spend our money; the kind of food we eat; our relationship with the environment; how we treat our companion animals; and how we view politics, business and education.

According to Gerald and Patricia Miche in *Toward a New World Order*, ahimsa is “an important concept not only in the development of a personal ecological ethic, but also as a philosophical foundation for the development of global structures that reinforce respect for, rather than violation of, the delicate balance and relatedness of all life forms.” Far from advocating an escapist lifestyle, the true understanding of dynamic harmlessness encourages us to take personal responsibility to respect life and further it as much as possible. And to do so with joy in our hearts.

Ahimsa stresses positive action when one is confronted with evil or danger. It is not defeatist, it is not sentimental, nor does it imply an avoidance of discomfort, pain or even death. Ahimsa can be called the dynamic expression of compassion in some of the most dangerous or difficult situations.

Mahatma Gandhi, whose efforts to practice dynamic compassion led to his assassination in 1948, wrote: “Ahimsa is not the way of the timid or cowardly. It is the way of the brave ready to face death. He who perishes sword in hand is no doubt brave, but he who faces death without raising his little finger and without flinching is braver.”

Ahimsa and Himsa

In order to better understand *ahimsa*, we need to have a clear understanding of its counterpart, *himsa*. In the ordinary sense, himsa is a synonym of the word violence- an overt act of destruction, the exertion of physical force which is meant to harm another, or a type of behavior designed to inflict personal injury to people or damage to property.

When this type of himsa is sanctioned by custom or tradition through the institutions of society (such as by government, business or schools) it becomes *institutionalized*. War between nations is the most dramatic form of institutionalized himsa, which can indeed be classified as institutionalized violence.

However, unlike violence, the word himsa can be applied to other harmful acts that do not involve physical assault: violent thought, hurtful speech, greed, deceit, and pride. In a broader sense, himsa can denote a *violation of personhood* when applied to humans, although it can be expanded to include all other life forms. When viewed in this context, any act of himsa- whether intentional or not- would violate the unique worth of each individual. And when considered in a deeper sense, any act which depersonalizes can be an act of himsa, because it transforms that person into a mere object to be used or manipulated.

Ahimsa forms the foundation of the belief system of the Jain religion, which is practiced by over three million people, mostly in India. Over the centuries, the Jains have enumerated no fewer than 432 types of himsa caused by thought, word and deed. Many types of himsa do not involve negative intent, and for this reason will not play a major role in our discussion here. “Necessary” himsa may take the form of a dentist pulling a tooth and causing temporary pain, or a surgeon cutting into a patient in order to save his or her life. Some forms of himsa are unavoidable. With every breath we take, we kill millions of tiny microbes. Insects and small mammals may be killed or injured in the harvesting of wheat. In addition to polluting the environment, when we drive a car there is the possibility of squashing a toad or other animal on the road, or killing some insects with the windshield or grille, even when traveling at slow speeds. Jain monks in India take their vows of compassion so seriously that they refuse to ride in motor vehicles, and are extremely careful of insects even when they walk along the street. According to the Jain text *Atma Tatva Vichar*:

A monk has to be over scrupulous to avoid any injury to subtle or gross beings, while moving, talking, eating, drinking, rising, sitting or sleeping. This is the reason why the monks maintain a broomstick with them. With the help of extremely soft type of woolen threads of the broom, they gently remove any living insect which might crawl on the body, dress, or other utensils lest it might be injured.

Himsa: Four Basic Types

Although we'll discuss acts of himsa towards other kinds of beings later on, the first part of this book will deal with the more immediate aspects of himsa towards other people. These types of himsa fall into the following four categories.

1. *Personal overt physical assault*: This would include acts of violence like beating, rape, abortion and other personal attacks.
2. *Institutionalized overt physical assault*: Acts of terrorism, war, and police brutality are among the most obvious examples.
3. *Personal covert himsa*: This is the psychologically dangerous himsa where human dignity and personhood are denied. Examples may include hurting another person through thought, word, or deed; withholding concern and/or support when the situation demands it; and individual postures of racism, sexism and prejudice based on a person's religious belief, age or sexual orientation.
4. *Institutionalized covert himsa*: Where institutions like business, government, schools or religious organizations violate the personhood of society's members, whether by acts of commission or omission. Poor housing, racial discrimination, unemployment, disenfranchisement, and neglect of those in mental institutions and nursing homes fit into this category.

Covert himsa, whether on personal or institutional levels, is especially dangerous, because it is often subtle or otherwise kept from view by either the established media or the institutions themselves. As a result, it is often tolerated within the structure of society, where it is allowed to fester like an untreated wound.

Most of us, for example, are unaware of the homeless people living in their cars or on the streets in our local communities. We have no clear idea of how many people are in prison and how long they will remain there. We often have a vague idea of what actually takes place in a slaughterhouse or vivisection laboratory, even when located nearby. We often have no direct knowledge of what occurs when toxic waste from a factory pollutes a river because a group of business executives was uncaring towards the environment.

Often, covert himsa can go on for years before it becomes public knowledge. The sexual abuse of young people by priests in the Roman Catholic Church had often been tolerated (though even an open secret) until recently, when victims decided to pursue both criminal and civil actions against both the priests and the church hierarchy that protected them. They also contacted major media organizations, which began their own investigations.

We mentioned earlier that the word himsa has no exact counterpart in English, although the term "violence" is often used. However, when we speak of injustice, greed or racism, it is perhaps more appropriate to use the word himsa, or when applicable, words like evil, injury or harm. Hoarding the world's resources or having Mexican peasants grow

strawberries for export instead of beans to feed their families may not be necessarily acts of violence, but well may be acts of himsa.

Advocates of ahimsa viewed it as the only alternative to himsa in the world, while maintaining that it would not necessarily be seen as a contrary force to himsa, because that would imply duality and struggle. Gandhi once compared the force of ahimsa to that of heat produced by the sun in its ability to melt snow and ice. He wrote, “The hardest metal yields to sufficient heat. Even so the hardest heart must melt before sufficiency of the heat of nonviolence. And there is no limit to the capacity of non-violence to generate heat.”

On a practical level, dynamic compassion can be expressed in many ways, though they gravitate towards four major areas:

Non-Resistance to Evil (Satyagraha)

Rather than a passive term, the doctrine of “non-resistance” to evil involves combating an injustice with active love (known as *agape* in Greek). When applied to social problems or the world of politics, this aspect of ahimsa involves the practice of *satyagraha*, which means “soul force” or “truth force” in Sanskrit. Gandhi believed that the combination of truth (*satya*) and firmness (*agraha*) engenders— and therefore can serve as a synonym for— force. In practical terms, *satyagraha* would simply mean *holding fast to* or *adherence to* truth. Gandhi was probably the foremost exponent of *satyagraha* in the twentieth century, and sought to practice it faithfully in his campaign to secure the independence of India from Great Britain.

In many quarters, *satyagraha* has been confused with the philosophy of passive resistance, although there is a marked difference between them. Passive resistance, as commonly understood, implies the action of the weak, unarmed or helpless. It does not reject violence as a matter of principle, but because the means for violence are lacking. It can even serve as a preparatory stage for violence, or other acts of armed resistance. The underlying objective is to harass or manipulate the opponent into a desired course of action.

Satyagraha, on the other hand, rejects violence as a matter of principle. The idea is not to harass or destroy the opponent, but to convert or win him or her over by patience, honesty, sympathy or self-suffering. It is based on the belief in the inherent goodness of every human being, however deeply buried this goodness may be. “Hate the sin and not the sinner” was Gandhi’s essential guideline for a practitioner of *satyagraha*, known as a *satyagrahi*.

While the work for an aspirant to *satyagraha* is primarily associated with political action, a *satyagrahi* can also devote his or her life to constructive activities in the spirit of service to the community. Speaking out (and working) for animal rights, aiding the homeless, visiting the sick, writing letters to public officials, working towards sobriety on the highways, promoting good nutrition, and doing fund-raising for charities like People for the Ethical Treatment for Animals, Amnesty International or UNICEF are all

worthwhile activities that promote peace and alleviate suffering in the local and planetary communities. Whether we support a campaign to end racism, promote adoption as an alternative to abortion, or plant trees in a poor neighborhood, we as individuals can do much to participate in the healing process of the planet on which we live.

However the most important role of a satyagrahi is *speaking the truth*. In a world where lying, deceit and manipulation are the norms— whether in business, politics or social interaction— the discernment of truth in daily life and its’ active (though often quiet) expression, is considered the hallmark of an aspirant to a life of compassion.

Nonviolent Direct Personal Action

This more radical aspect of dynamic compassion can take the form of peaceful demonstrations, picketing, vigils, fasting, boycotts, raids (such as entering a laboratory and freeing animals that are being experimented upon by vivisectionists), blockades, publicly speaking out for truth and justice, and other active work for peace.

These activities can -and often do- involve personal danger, because we risk attack by those who disagree with us or who are entrusted with maintaining civic order, like the police or military. In some cases, we may need to protect another person who is being attacked, or risk our personal safety by helping others during an earthquake, fire, flood or other disaster.

One case in point involved Gurudev Chitrabhanuji, a widely respected spiritual leader of the Jains. While walking with a group of fellow monks in India, they came upon a burning building that was part of a Roman Catholic convent. Several nuns were trapped inside and were shouting for help. Jain monks are strictly forbidden to touch a woman, because so doing is a violation of their religious doctrine and is seen as detrimental to spiritual development. Gurudev Chitrabhanuji realized that ahimsa was the highest law. He ran into the building repeatedly and succeeded in carrying out three of the nuns before being injured by a falling beam.

Non-cooperation

Non-cooperation involves respectful disobedience to an unjust law or command. Examples of non-cooperation can include refusing to participate in military service or the draft, strikes, peaceful occupations of property, or refusing to pay a tax that will finance war. Gandhi wrote:

Non-cooperation is a protest against an unwitting and unwilling participation in evil... Non-cooperation with an evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good. There is no instrument so clean, so harmless, and yet so effective as non-cooperation.

Pure intent is essential for these more radical expressions of dynamic compassion. Since the true impact of compassion is directly in proportion to our underlying intent for

practicing it, we must be very honest with ourselves about our motivations. Ulterior motives of self-gratification, the desire to manipulate others, to achieve publicity for our cause, or dividing people from each other can easily destroy the fragile essence of compassion, and produce only hollow, confusing or temporary results.

At the same time, common sense is essential for nonviolent action, which should be based on a careful analysis of the situation at hand, weighing all of the possibilities, limitations and alternatives. Only then can an aspirant to ahimsa make a sensible judgment according to his or her abilities, knowing that a nonviolent solution may not always be possible.

Injuring or killing an armed attacker as a last resort in order to save the life of another can be a true act of compassion. The heroes who tried to wrest control of United Airlines flight 186 from armed hijackers on September 11, 2001 were motivated by the desire to save the lives of both passengers and those on the ground, even if they were forced to take the lives of the terrorists in the process. Gandhi taught that “Ahimsa is the highest duty. Even if we cannot practice it in full, we must try to understand its spirit and refrain as far as humanly possible from violence.”

Dynamic Compassion

Dynamic compassion is by far the most applicable in our daily lives, and thus offers the widest range of opportunities for creative expression. Dynamic compassion does not only call for renouncing himsa where it is usually expressed, but calls upon us to utilize loving, healing and unifying action in all circumstances. This would involve:

- Healing instead of causing harm.
- Respecting and furthering life instead of limiting or destroying it.
- Serving as an active channel for compassion by opening the heart.

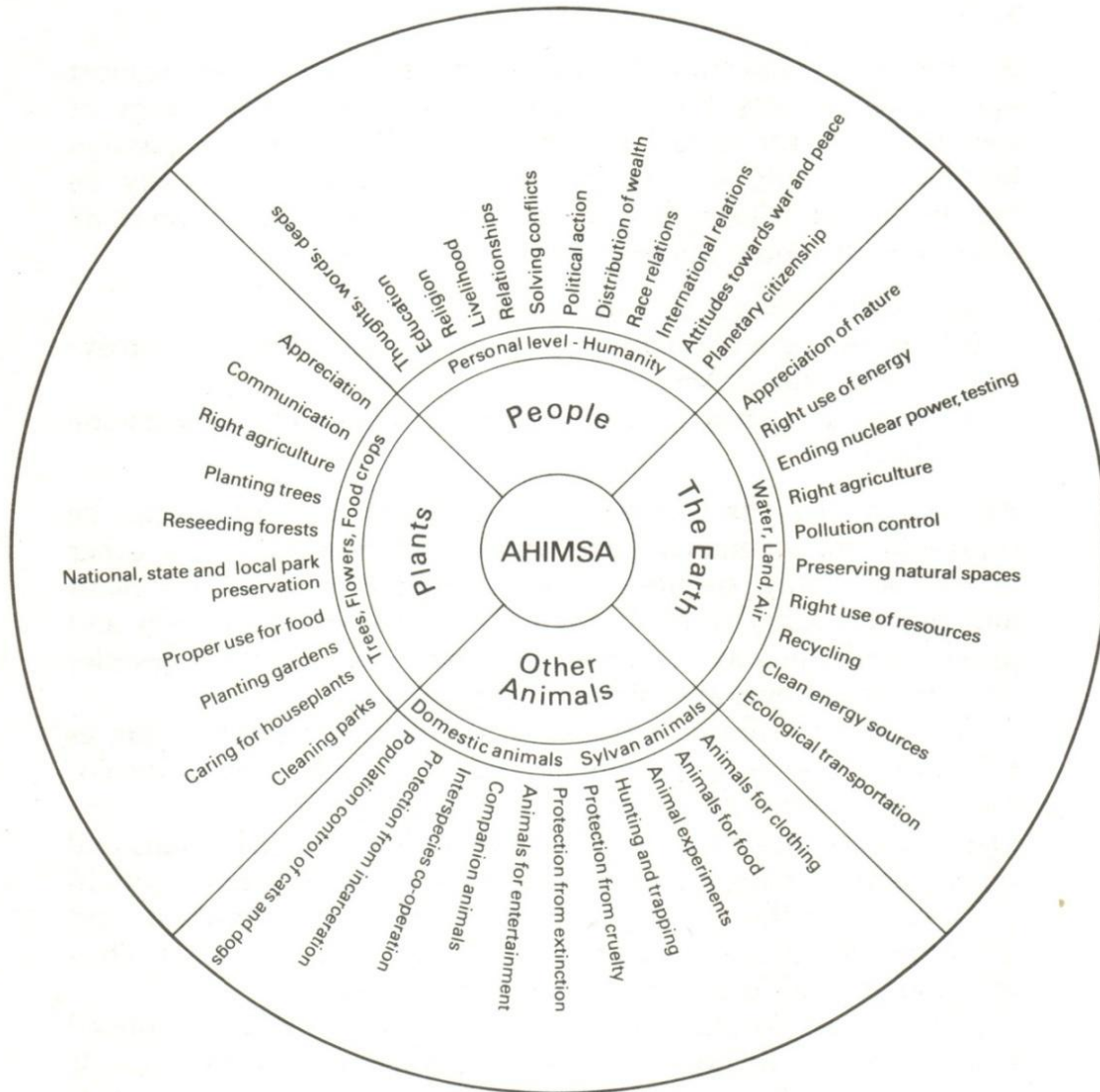
As seen in the chart on the following page, this aspect of ahimsa can be expressed on a personal level in our relationships with other people, other species of animals, as well as with plants and minerals. It is reflected on how we conduct our lives inside the home, and how we relate to others as neighbors, businesspeople, teachers and students. It also is reflected by our experience of connectedness with both our local and planetary communities, and the quality of being intimately involved with the world around us. As Matthew Fox, an American priest and theologian best known for reviving the ancient tradition of Creation Spirituality, wrote in *A Spirituality Named Compassion*:

Compassion is a way of being at home in the universe, with life and with death, with the seen and unseen. The energy-consciousness that compassion presumes takes one beyond mere psychologies and spiritualities of inter-personalism.

The spirit of dynamic compassion is based on the unitive quality of nature. It can be seen in the cooperative structure of the atom, the symbiotic relationship among plants, soil, water and air; the social quality among humans and other animal species, and the

magnetic forces that maintain the delicate balance of the solar system. Magnetism, cooperation, and unity are basic to life and are essential for planetary survival. They are fundamental for all growth and development.

Dynamic compassion can take many forms, and can be integrated and applied in all facets of daily life. It may be true that dynamic compassion is not for the few. It is an innate quality found in every woman, man and child, and is within the reach of everyone who sincerely desires to claim it.



The Scope of Ahimsa

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