

Healing Power of Ahimsa

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The world watched in a state of shock and horror the twin towers of the World Trade Centre hurtling down to the ground in 2001 killing on the spot more than 3000 innocent people. It was the ghastliest act of terrorism in the new millennium and no words would be enough to condemn it. It was natural for the people of America and the rest of the world to be indignant, but did they ever think why it happened so? Why was it that some young people chose to die along with those whom they had killed so mercilessly? There must be something terrible in their minds which made them conclude that it was better to kill and die than to live. But why did they ventilate their anger on the defenseless innocent people? It was the result of their training in the cult of hatred and violence and their illusory belief that what they were doing was right. The people of America are still in the grip of perpetual fear and panic lest terrorists should strike again. It is feared that the secret Al Qaeda network is still active and may cause havoc to the citizens of USA. The 9/11 catastrophe was the result of the jihadi hatred or xenophobia Muslim youths were exposed to and the poison is spreading fast across the world.

On account of its vast resources, unity of its people and strong national character the US Government has at least succeeded in preventing terrorist strikes after the 9/11 catastrophe. On the contrary India continues to be a soft target of the terrorist violence despite the moral support it gets at global level and tightening of security measures after each strike. More than two thousand innocent people have fallen prey to terrorists' bullets in Delhi, Mumbai, Varanasi, Ahmedabad, Jaipur and Bangalore. On 26th Nov. 2008 the world witnessed the most horrendous spectacle of jihadis running amok at a busy railway station, two five-star hotels and a hospital in Mumbai spraying bullets on helpless people. The people of India are still in a state of shock as I write this article. They are angry and indignant and want the Indian Government to destroy terrorists training camps in Pakistan territory and teach the 'rogue nation' a lesson. Only three weeks ago I organized the 7th International Conference on Peace and Nonviolent Action at Jaipur in

which about a hundred highly committed nonviolence workers from across the world took part. The basic objective of the 7th ICPNA was to search for alternatives to violence which is making it difficult for people to live peacefully on the planet.

The presence of the two apostles of ahimsa – the 89 year old Acharya Mahapragya known widely for his Ahimsa March across the country and his successor Yuvacharya Mahashraman – added luster to the spiritual ambience that prevailed at the venue of the conference. The soul-stirring addresses by Acharya Mahapragya and Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, the former president of India stressed the need for individual transformation through nonviolent lifestyle. A large number of the delegates were skeptical about the efficacy of ahimsa in tackling terror but they forgot that any step taken in a state of anger would only mean more violence and greater toll of innocent lives. The 60 hours of terrorism in Mumbai led my intimate friend Archbishop Delmer Robinson from USA, who couldn't come to the conference, to write to me, "Did those hours give reflective thoughts to the massive tasks ahead or is there a ray of sunshine that you would see in your deliberations? We here feel the sorrow of India. At the same time, this person would see the ability and diligence of great and strong peoples able to climb to the mountain tops again and again as has been required of them many times previously. I hear the youth crying out for military action against Pakistan. Can you and would you speak to this?" I wrote back to him that the whole nation is shaken by the catastrophe. If we resort to military action we will walk into the jihadis' trap. It will mean war and more suffering. So the saner voices in the country would want the Govt. to evolve a fool-proof preventive strategy and rupture terrorists' attempt to provoke us into going in for a war. The catastrophe should awaken us morally, make us realize that corruption, narrow sectarian and caste loyalties and hunger and poverty breed jihadis. Let us nip these evils in the bud by pledging that we will be patriotic to the core. It alone is the answer to sixty hours of terrorism in Mumbai.

Unfortunately these dastardly acts were carried out mostly by misguided Muslim youths in the name of Allah and Islam. The advent of religious terrorism is a great challenge humanity is facing today. The purpose of religion is to infuse into us moral consciousness and inspire us to love all living beings. Instead religion is being used as an instrument for fueling flames of communal hatred. The Oxford dictionary defines religion as the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a

personal God or gods, a particular system of faith and worship, a pursuit or interest followed with devotion. The editor of this dictionary was influenced by what he observed in the Western society. The real meaning of the word 'religion' or 'dharma' is righteousness. I quote Acharya Tulsi's views on dharma which he expounded in the wake of the Anuvrat Movement he launched in India in 1949 for ridding society of violence and immorality.

- *Dharma occupies the first place, sect comes next.*
- *There may be many sects but dharma belongs to all.*
- *Dharma is quite distinct from politics. It must not be subjected to political interferences.*
- *Dharma is not merely an instrument of ensuring happiness in the hereafter but it is also a means to bring happiness to the present life.*
- *He who fails to make his present life better is unlikely to achieve happiness in the hereafter.*
- *The primary aim of dharma is to purify character. Its ritualistic practices are secondary.*

He further warned religious leaders against drifting away from the path of righteous conduct and resorting to violence and cruelty just to impose their views of dharma on others. A religion that preaches violence is not religion. Such people are only playing hoax on God and are only fooling themselves.

People continue to ask: is there no other way to prevent such acts of barbarism and savagery? Is there no alternative to violence? Can *ahimsa* prove to be an antidote to jihadi violence? The answer is 'yes' provided we can learn the real meaning of dharma and art of forgiving and are able to listen to our inner voice. Tolerance has in it the power to reverse the devastating trend. What is most distressing is that religious intolerance is on the increase and fanaticism is percolating through the minds of youths and children. It is time we took concrete steps to stop the march of the forces of violence and vandalism.

The person most concerned about this catastrophic situation today is Acharya Mahapragya, the 89 year old head of a Jain sect and a nonviolent

crusader for peace and nonviolence. His Anuvrat Movement aims at transforming the individual by seeking his commitment to basic vows (anuvrats) forbidding killing, exploitation, corruption, discrimination and acquisitiveness. He has taken up the challenge and has embarked on an infinite AHIMSA YATRA (a journey on foot to enhance the people's awareness of ahimsa) to tell the people that 'violence does not end violence, it perpetuates itself. We can put an end to it by cultivating the power of ahimsa within us.'

As he moved through the villages of Gujarat in the year 2002 with his group of monks and nuns radiating love and compassion, thousands of people including youths and children pledged themselves to tread the path of ahimsa. His walk through the riot-torn streets of Gujarat which reminded the people of Mahatma Gandhi's historic walk through Noakhali in 1947 went a long way in healing the wounds of the people. Anuvibha, an actor of a culture of peace and nonviolence, is following his trail and is instrumental in carrying his message of ahimsa across the frontiers.

Jains, non-Jains, theists and atheists, social and political workers flock to him for advice. He tells them that it is not possible to change those who have been indoctrinated and are already on the killing spree but we may succeed in preventing the emergence of terrorists in the future. If some proponents of the cult of violence can succeed in poisoning and changing the minds of some youths why can't we succeed in bringing about a change of heart in them? It is possible only if moral and spiritual values which alone ensure co-existence and social excellence are made an integral part of school and university curriculums. We have to develop a global education programme for peace and universal responsibility and make it a compulsory subject for students at all levels. In the words of Acharya Mahapragya we may call it a sort of nonviolence training. We need to change our lifestyle and realize that the basis of co-existence is ahimsa or what we call 'nonviolence'. Let us make a small beginning by pledging ourselves to observe an *anuvrat* (a small vow) that we will not kill an innocent human being irrespective of his faith, caste and nationality. It is the first lesson of nonviolence training being imparted in various centers run by Acharya Mahapragya's followers. A person can extend his vow gradually towards non-humans. The ideal is that we not only stop killing humans but also animals, birds and all biologically diverse creatures. We must stop killing nature which includes forests, mountains and rivers which sustain us on the

planet. But to begin with let us make a small commitment not to kill innocent humans.

The healing power of ahimsa was demonstrated by Lord Mahavira, Lord Buddha, Jesus Christ, Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Since every living being wants to live, even terrorists who are killing innocent beings in the name of Allah or their personal God want to live – you may have seen them running for cover after a blast – let us at least refrain from killing innocent human beings.

Now I turn to another aspect of the senseless killing. In the first para of my article I have raised a question that agitates my mind very often: why do these people turn suicide bombers? Life is dear to everyone. Why is it that a person chooses to end it voluntarily for a ‘so-called cause’? We must have the patience to listen to his tale of suffering. I heard a Jihadi saying on a TV channel that what he is doing is an act of revenge for the riots in Gujarat which took a toll of 3000 innocent Muslims. It is reactive violence and it is this type of violence that is being perpetrated by jihadis. If the root cause is eradicated, there remains no basis for revenge. If we believe in peace, we must have the patience to listen and be willing to redress the grievance if it is really genuine. Violence takes root in injustice, nepotism, corruption, racial and ethnic prejudice, hunger, poverty and exploitation. These evils have no place in a peaceful and nonviolent society. We have to guard against the use of religion in such matters. If a terrorist, who actually has no religion, happens to belong to a particular community, unfortunately the community begins to stand behind him and his heinous act is shrouded in a hue and cry. It is the duty of all religious communities to see that self-motivated young persons are not allowed to use religion as an instrument for achieving their selfish goal. Sometimes criminals seek shelter in the shields of their religions or castes and the people are led away. Only those who do not believe in religious morality fall a prey to such prejudices. Religion without morality is like a body without life. Religion is synonymous with morality. In addition to jihadi violence India is also facing a serious threat of Naxal violence in many states. The main cause of the Naxal violence is corruption coupled with hunger and poverty. We must root out corruption and the Naxal violence will naturally come to an end.

Human history is replete with innumerable instances of the transformation of the cruelest and hardened criminals with the power of love and ahimsa. Let us not reproduce them here but instead try to go deep into

the causes of terrorism. Acharya Mahapragya is of the view that most acts of violence that we see today originate first in hunger and poverty and later degenerate into fanaticism. If moral sense dawns upon the haves of the world and voluntarily share their excess resources with the have-nots, not only the problem of hunger and poverty can be effectively combated but terrorism can be completely eliminated. Many Muslims scholars say that the word 'Jihad' doesn't stand for physical war but means struggle or striving against our evil propensities. If the message is asserted by imams and clerics all over the world, the culture of war will be reversed and the number of those who understand the true meaning of jihad will increase rapidly. The only way to stem the tide of violence is to highlight the healing power of ahimsa. It alone is the basis of our salvation.