

More The Extravagance, Greater The Violence

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The great Indian epic, the Mahabharata, says: "Ahimsa or non-violence is the greatest dharma." Ahimsa was also one of the most effective means by which M K Gandhi helped liberate the country from foreign domination.

The word ahimsa is derived from the Sanskrit verb 'hims' which means to kill, to injure, or to hurt. The absence of these violent tendencies is ahimsa. The practice of non-violence calls for an understanding of violence and its cause. The principal cause of violence lies in the ignorance of the true nature of the Self that is characterised by happiness, peace and completeness. This ignorance results in insecurity, selfishness, hatred, aggression and competition.

Ignorance propels a person to resort to violence to fulfil his egocentric needs. It is for this reason that scriptures advise: "Do not harm any living being." Why, because I do not want to be harmed. I should not do unto others what I do not want done unto me. In this way, ahimsa becomes a universal law necessary to safeguard the order of the universe.

Violence occurs at three levels: in deeds, words and thoughts. Absolute non-violence at the level of deeds is impossible because some amount of violence might be necessary in order to survive in life. Even chores such as eating, cooking, walking and cleaning involve sacrificing minute life forms. Therefore, practice of ahimsa at this level would mean to reduce violence to the bare minimum. The more we increase our needs and the more extravagant we are, the more the violence. An awareness of this would require one to cut down one's needs and live a simple life as much as

possible. In Gandhi's case, the loincloth he wore symbolised this concept.

With respect to food, opting for vegetarianism would be an expression of ahimsa. Even that involves destroying plant life. We can hurt others even through words. Sri Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita: "Speaking words which do not inflict pain, which are sweet, truthful and also beneficial, constitute austerity of speech".

Subtler than ahimsa at the level of words is that at the level of mind. Nursing hurtful thoughts for others is violence, too. When entertained for a long time, violence is bound to find an outlet through words or deeds. Words and deeds are generated in the mind, and this is also where violence in thought occurs. So the first step is to check violence in the mind.

One way of doing this is to constantly replenish the mind with positive thoughts. If, for instance, the mind is full of anger, hatred and jealousy for someone, we could flood the mind with feelings of forgiveness, tolerance and accommodation, to flush the mind of violent tendencies.

Ignorance of the true nature and glory of the Self result in violence at the level of mind, words and deeds. Therefore, knowledge of the Self is ahimsa in the true sense of the word. Practising ahimsa in mind, word and deed paves the way for attaining to knowledge of the Self.

Implementation of ahimsa calls for sensitivity towards fellow beings, animals, insects, and plants and towards entire Creation. Awareness of the need of others and a proactive effort to fulfil them requires the sacrifice of one's own needs. Not only is ahimsa the greatest dharma, it is the only dharma.

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Today is Gandhi Jayanti.



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