

Making Nonviolence (*Ahimsā*) a Lifestyle Priority¹

By Parveen Jain



There is something uniquely horrible about the violence of the modern era. The ancient Jain tradition has a long history of analyzing the fundamental causes of violence to reveal solutions that begin with the core of who we are: beings who are essentially good and caring, and who can realize this essential part of ourselves by practicing nonviolence (*ahimsā*).

Preventable violence is increasing all around us. That is not a new revelation. However, what is alarming and needs to be reversed is the chilling fact that we are becoming increasingly used to it; it is becoming normal. Upon hearing about a mass killing, we quickly search to find its magnitude and location, and when we learn that it is not near us or does not directly affect us, we tend to relax and move on to other concerns. But should we just move on?

No, we shouldn't. We must not allow the escalation of violence in our modern society to become normal because violence is not our natural trait. On the contrary, Jain Dharma teaches us that nonviolence (*ahimsā*) is consistent with our natural way of being. All living beings around us are striving for peace, and no one likes to be hurt. Why then do we cause hurt to others?

Wild animals rarely attack others without a genuine rationale: carnivores do so to satisfy their hunger or to protect themselves and their clan, and herbivores attack mainly for self-protection. Why is it that human beings behave differently? Why, for example, do we kill strangers who are not threatening us? And why do we call hunting and killing animals a “game”?

Video on Ahimsa by Phillip Wollen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsfX0u80M5c>

The answer lies in how we view life, and the unchecked erosion of our abilities to differentiate between right and the wrong. All living beings love peace and are endowed with intrinsic characteristics of consciousness, bliss, and vigor (*caitanya*, *sukha*, *vīrya*), to varying degrees. As, presumably, the most intelligent species on earth, our intellects should be accompanied by a heightened sense of responsibility, but we seem to disregard this. And we start faltering when we lose the sense of this responsibility. We tend to forget our essential selves, that our true purpose is to live compassionately and non-violently.

The essential self is a calm and pure soul in eternity. Continually over time, however, humans obstruct the natural goodness of our souls with actions triggered by the vicissitudes of our minds under the influence of ego, anger, greed, and deceit—features that are collectively called “passions” (*kaṣāya*-s). These passions cause us to act contrary to our natural character. They trigger self-aggrandizement, and we start to believe that we are the smartest and most important, that our views are the only correct views and the only ones that matter, and other such notions. When others think differently than we do, and we are under the influence of our passions, we feel agitated and start acting in ways that are unnatural to us, and more often than not we become violent to some degree. Those who caused the 9/11 attack, one of the most gruesome human acts in recent history, thought that their way of living was the only legitimate way, and they aimed to convert or eliminate those who did not agree with it. This is only one example of how human passions turn to arrogance, and how arrogance can turn into an ideology that becomes violent in its expression.

Violence is not committed only through physical actions, as is generally perceived. One’s mind, body, and speech act in unison as an impetus to trigger the outward manifestation of violence. Mental trepidations and fear-based thinking are underlying factors, and their influences are carried out through speech and physical action. For instance, when a person contemplates and vengefully plots to hurt (insult, injure, or kill) someone, that person is engrossed in mental

violence, which can manifest first in spiteful or hateful speech—another form of violence—that is often followed by actual physical violence by the individual or by others under that person's influence. Thus, violence has many causal conditions that proceed its manifestation as a physical action.

Nonviolence in speech is especially important for leaders because speech is their primary medium to inspire their followers. Mahatma Gandhi, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela are glowing examples of the leaders who spoke compassionately and led millions of people to peacefully achieve what was perceived to be impossible without violence. But when a leader deliberately incites violence, for example by publicly characterizing members of an ethnic group as murderers and rapists, such speech incites hatred and violence toward that group. Such speech-instigated hatred is severe violence, and leaders must avoid it particularly because they influence many more individuals by speech than ordinary citizens do.

The purpose behind an act of violence is important. A surgeon making a cut on a patient's body in an operation aimed to bring relief to the patient is an act of compassion. If the same physician does it with an intention to kill, however, that would be categorized as an act of inexcusable violence.

How an act of violence is committed is important as well. Unknowingly stepping on an insect while walking is inadvertent violence. By being careful, we can minimize such violence, but complete elimination of it is practically impossible. On the other hand, hitting someone while enraged during a heated argument, for example, is an act of serious violence. Such behavior occurs when one suddenly loses self-control upon not getting what is desired and/or is under the spell of passions such as jealousy, ego, and so on. Such tendencies can be controlled with behavioral restraints. Extemporaneous violence of any kind is bad, but when someone schemes to commit violence, such as planning to attack another individual, this is a much worse form of violence because it has multidimensional involvement: the offender engages in regressive thoughts followed by violence of speech or of physical action or both. When accompanied by torture or physical abuse, violence becomes even more horrifying.

Factors that made the 9/11 attack so heinous included the detailed plan to kill as many people as possible, to pick sites that would flaunt the murderers' atrocious capabilities, and then to proudly glorify the plan's execution. The attack was inspired by their leaders' mental disposition of

revulsion toward those who did not follow a certain way of life, leading to actions such as hateful speech, recruitment drives, and urging others to plan to inflict maximum damage to life.

Brainwashing followers with the lure of going to heaven after death, and the follow-up glorification and celebration of the attacks are all indicators of the wicked violence on the part of the leaders of the 9/11 attacks. They thought their way of living was the only correct one and that everyone else must adhere to it, which resulted in the most horrific kind of violence.

Violence toward animals and ecology is widespread, and unfortunately it is not viewed as gravely as is violence against people. For instance, farmed animals like cows and chickens, sea creatures like salmon and lobsters, pets like dogs and cats, all breathe and have feelings of pain, suffering, and pleasure like us. Why then do we treat some animals like inanimate objects? Meat-producing corporations routinely brag about increasing “production” by creating faster breeding and shortened growing cycles, as if their “products” were lifeless objects. They gloat about increasing “production” using efficient broiler breeds using chemicals that make the animals grow bigger faster, with reduced feed. This type of growth is extremely painful for the animal because its body fat grows unnaturally fast, causing severe pain due to underdeveloped bone structures. Similar animal cruelty also occurs in the dairy industry. In some ways, violence against animals should be considered more horrible because they have no recourse to protect themselves; they are not intelligent and resourceful like humans are.

Human violence against ecology and the environment, due to both careless and deliberate actions for financial or lifestyle reasons continues to cause irreparable and irreversible damage.

Indiscriminate deforestation, unchecked pollution-causing lifestyles, the use of ecologically destructive substances, the wasteful use of water resources, all of these have contributed to the increase of wildfires, hurricanes, and other similar calamities. Unrestrained human behavior is causing the extinction of scores of species of animals² and ecology which will create long-term ecological imbalance with unpredictable damaging repercussions. These are all acts of violence that will affect future generations. Carelessness can be absolved when followed by corrective action, but deliberate greed-driven actions are serious offenses.

One can surmise, as did the ancient Jain sages, that greed and uncontrolled behavior are the worst instigators of violence, directly or indirectly. It is very easy to be greedy about wealth, fame, power, education, possessions of various kinds, etc., and in some ways these inclinations

are the hardest to control. When one comes under the influence of greed, one exerts all-out efforts to achieve the desired goal. This leads to egotistic behavior, and if one does not achieve or under-achieves the desired results, one gets angry, begins to make dubious plans, and becomes deceitful. Each of the passions instigate violence in the form of foul speech or physical action, or both. If we control our greed, and are respectful to everything around us, we can begin to restrain ourselves from actions based on anger, ego, arrogance, and deceit, and our violent tendencies start to diminish. In some sense, self-control and contentment are the most important traits to have for a broader cultivation of nonviolence. Jain Dharma teaches us that if we learn to control our own internal passions, which are the actual cause of violence, we will extinguish the cause of violence itself. In the modern age of horrific acts of violence, the message of Jain nonviolence is more important now than it has ever been.

- 1 For more in-depth information on this topic, see chapter 12, “Right Conduct and Doctrine of Ethics” in [An Introduction to Jain Philosophy](#), Parveen Jain, 2020.
- 2 See Jim Daley, “Silent Skies: Billions of North American Birds Have Vanished,” *Scientific American*, September 19, 2019, [ScientificAmerican.com](#), 2019