

## THE MEANING OF 'AHIMSA'

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It is an observable fact that in our meetings, whenever the subject of **ahimsa** is mentioned the discussion invariably becomes concentrated on two questions:

- (1) Is it obligatory for a Buddhist to be a vegetarian?
- (2) What line of action should Buddhists pursue in regard to flies, bugs, fleas, mosquitoes, rats and such other forms of life detrimental to man?

A desultory debate generally follows with nothing convincingly decisive emerging from the discussion except advice from the fundamentalists who maintain that the procedure proper for a Buddhist is to chase the flies and mosquitoes ceremoniously out of the window. The discussion generally ends on that note. And that appears to be the sum total of what the word '**ahimsa**' (harmlessness, non-hurting, non-killing, non-violence) evokes among people who are interested in Buddhism.

Actually, both questions pose fictitious problems if considered from a world-wide point of view. We know from our reading of the Buddhist scriptures that the Buddha did not demand strict vegetarianism from his followers:

"It is not through the partaking of meat or flesh that man becomes impure, but through drunkenness, obstinacy, bigotry, deceit, envy, self-exaltation, disparagement of others and evil intentions – through these a man becomes impure." (Fundamentals of Buddhism – Nyanatiloka – Condensed from the Sutta Nipaka).

Regarded from a practical point of view, it is a fictitious problem in a world in which two-thirds of the world population are undernourished. Thus the real problem demanding solution is how to solve the anomaly of hunger in midst of plenty. Vegetarianism in the Buddhist way of life is optional.

### **Ridiculous**

The question as to whether we should nurture vermin is a ridiculous one. Considered in the light of modern science which has proved beyond the shadow of doubt, that flies, fleas, mosquitoes, lice and rats are the primary cause of many diseases such as typhus, malaria, plague, gastroenteritis, and many others which have been responsible for the deaths of millions of human beings. Again, purely from the point of Buddhists doctrine, a human life is of greater value than any other because it is the only one in which progress towards enlightenment can be made.

From a secular commonsense aspect, higher form of life should not be sacrificed for the preservation of lower forms. (The terms 'higher' and 'lower' here are used strictly in the biological sense, as, for instance, the rabbit is a higher form of life than the unicellular amoeba. No oblique reference is intended to anything resembling Hitler's discredited theory of a master-race among human beings. This is pure nonsense. All are simply 'homo sapiens').

Actually, there is the most urgent need for people to become aware that the human race itself is in danger. Here are some of the imminent problems looming large on the horizon and threatening man's continuity of existence on this planet:

- (1) Wars and their destruction of human life and natural resources.
- (2) The nuclear arms race and the test explosion of bombs with the effect of the fall-out.
- (3) Racial discrimination and its accompanying internecine warfare.
- (4) The wanton destruction of flora and fauna, the wastage of minerals and other natural resources, the destruction of rain forests and the indiscriminate use of insecticides.

When expanded, the last category means that the good earth itself and all that it inherits is being destroyed and not destroyed slowly, either, but at an alarming speed.

Recently the Superintendent of the Australian Museum, Dr. Evans (himself an entomologist), made a statement on his retirement to the effect that, if the present rate of devastation is allowed to continue, man must eventually become an extinct species and if another form of life arises to take his place, he will have the sole distinction of being remembered as having been a very stupid mammal.

Likewise, Albert Schweitzer said:

"Man has lost the capacity to foresee and forestall. He will end by destroying the earth".

And Sir Philip Baxter of the University of N.S.W. and a scientist of international reputation:

"There is, as a last resort, the possibility that science has given man the power to remove himself and leave the world to a more rational species." ("Sydney Morning Herald" April 16th 1966)

Admittedly, some of these questions are of a highly political nature and their solution must be effected at a political level. It would be futile to imagine that they can be tackled under the aegis of a Buddhist society, which is a non-political organization in the first place, but is one wholly occupied with the clarification of ethical and spiritual values. Even so, there is a link, however subtle, for no aspect of life is ever totally separate from every other and the political institutions of any nation are always being challenged and are ultimately controlled by the ethical and spiritual standards of that nation. No religion, even though it studiously avoids entering the political arena, forbids its adherents to think about the problems facing themselves and others. Buddhism directs us to face them in a spirit of love and compassion.

Apropos of compassion: It is just a thought, but instead of sitting for hours in absorption on such a koan as: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” may a little concentration on: “What can I do to minimize some of the unnecessary suffering of living beings?” may be more conducive to real insight.

### **Lip-Service**

Not all people are temperamentally suited to enter public life or dabble in politics. There are, none the less, many other fields of activity open to the person really and sincerely concerned with **ahimsa** beyond giving it the token lip-service. Right now, before it is too late, there is a crying need for ALL people (not just the experts) to realize how vitally necessary it is to stem the tide of destruction of the natural resources of the earth and of its flora and fauna. This should have a special appeal for Buddhists for the Buddha taught the doctrine of love and compassion – not only to be applied to human beings, but to other living things as well. This means animals, birds, and insects. We cannot apply it absolutely, as we have said at the beginning, but we are under an obligation to endeavour to apply it to the maximum degree possible in this imperfect world. Buddhists all the world over, to this day, are proud of the fact that the first hospitals in the world both for men and animals, were built by that dedicated Buddhist, Emperor Asoka, who also even in those far off days, centuries B.C. was enlightened enough to understand the importance of water, both for man and beast, and had wells dug for that purpose throughout his vast domain.

With such a long established tradition, it is not necessary to appeal to Buddhists on the basis of self-interest in order to win their support for conservation in the present state of emergency. Some people in our midst still cherish the notion that animals were created expressly for their benefit. The Buddhist attitude, on the contrary, is that there is no fundamental difference between the various forms of life; but the manifestation of a karmic current, which arises sometimes

as an animal and at other times as a human being, dependent on certain conditions.

### **Essential**

However, it is essential for Buddhists to understand that when the Buddha enunciated his doctrine of **ahimsa** as an abstract, general principle governing Right Action or Behaviour, it was a protest, specifically directed against the plush privilege of the priestly caste, the Brahmins, who had brain-washed the people of India into believing that salvation depended upon the correctness of the rites of sacrifice involving the slaughter of an incredible number of helpless animals. The efficacy of these bloodthirsty rites presided over by the priesthood was the burning question of that day. Naturally, the Buddha, on all approximate occasions, stressed the moral obligation to give up “onslaught on creatures” (to quote the some-what quaint and stilted phrase that Miss I. B. Horner uses in her translations). In “The Light of Asia”, Sir Edwin Arnold puts into the mouth of the Buddha:

**“I were all as good to ease one best of grief.  
As sit and watch the sorrows of the world,  
In yonder caverns with the priests who pray”.**

Today, the same slaughter of helpless animals is going on and the same problem exists with a slightly different twist. Animals are no longer sacrificed in temples as propitiatory offerings to the gods but animals are still being sacrificed on the altars of man’s vanity, man’s sadism, man’s greed for profit, e.g. the fur and feather trades, the hunting and bull-fight rackets. Under these circumstances, we are proud of the fact that some of our members are actively participating in the movement for preservation in New Guinea where recently there was an attempt made to introduce a bill into the House of Representatives, lifting the prohibition on the killing of the Bird of Paradise. But there not been a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or any organized opposition, the bill would probably have gone through and the most beautiful and rare bird in the world would have been doomed to extinction.

### **Ignorance**

Undoubtedly, much of the present sorry state of affairs is due to ignorance. From the Buddhist point of view it is always ignorance that constitutes the crime. We should have more and more teachings on the dangers resulting from a headless interference with the balance of nature and for the urgent necessity of adopting measures to maintain and preserve that balance. All the available avenues of reaching the general public should be used for that purpose – the daily press, the cinema, radio, television, lectures etc. Most important is it to

start with the children to teach them reverence for life and responsibility towards living things. However, there's the paradox. How can we start on the children without first educating the parents and teachers? No! All should be contacted in this regard simultaneously. The non-Buddhist world has yet to realise that:

**“All things by immortal power, near or far,  
Hiddenly  
To each other linked are,  
That thou canst not stir a flower  
Without troubling a star”.**

(Mistress of Vision -Francis Thompson)

### **Aware**

The Buddhist world is already aware of this. It knows that **ahimsa** is a cosmic truth, valid at all times everywhere. However, an enlightened principle needs an enlightened application. Sometime ago it was given over the air that in famine-stricken India, the grain merchants are Jains (also pledged to **ahimsa**, the cardinal tenet of their faith) and that, because of their religion which absolutely prohibits the taking of any life whatsoever, 20 percent of all grain was being consumed by rats; that the Jains actually maintained a temple where thousands of the creatures were deliberately fed up by the faithful. The broadcast went on to report that the Jain grain merchants had been approached to end this extreme form of ahimsa and that most of them had been persuaded to co-operate, 10 percent remaining obdurate to all pleas of reason.

Would the Buddha have approved the action of the Jain minority? If he had, he would not have been the Buddha.

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