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Culture of Nonviolence

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Introduction

To understand the culture of nonviolence, we must first learn the meanings of culture and of nonviolence. Webster's Dictionary gives the following definitions of culture:

- a. Development, improvement, or refinement of the mind, emotions, interests, manners, taste, etc., and, the result of this.
- b. Refined ways of thinking, talking, acting, etc.
- c. The ideas, customs, skills, arts, etc. of a given people in a given period; civilization.

Nonviolence is abstaining from violence to varying degrees. Acharya Umasvati gives the following definition of violence in TATTVARTHASUTRA (one of the scriptures accepted by all Jains, Digambaras as well as Shvetambaras):

PRAMMATA YOGAAT PRAAN VYAPAROPANAM HIMSHA [Chapter 7:13]

(Violence is obstruction of life processes (of self and of others) effected by lack of conscientiousness.)

Life processes are of two kinds: Gross life processes (DRAVYA PRAAN) such as breathing, eating, and, subtle life processes (BHAAV PRAAN) such as thoughts, feelings and emotions. Correspondingly, violence is of two kinds: Physical violence (DRAVYA HIMSA) and mental violence (BHAAV HIMSA). Physical violence is killing or causing bodily injury to a living being, it is gross violence. Mental violence is the violence of thoughts, feelings and emotions. It is subtle, abstract, and intangible. It consists of causing anxiety, suspicion, fear, etc. Thus anger, pride, intrigue and greed constitute abstract violence. Fear, suspicion, hatred, lies, thievery, cheating, subversion, possessiveness and taking more than one's fair share involve violence of thoughts, feelings and emotions of self and of other individuals. In the culture of nonviolence, an individual's thoughts and actions originate from a rational mind and pure heart, without any ego, pride, fear, intrigue or greed. The culture of nonviolence is the process of improving and refining our lives through our practice of nonviolence.

All religions teach us to practice nonviolence, to speak the truth, to practice celibacy and to limit one's possessions. However, the Jain scriptures provide a systematic analysis of nonviolence. Our scriptures

say that untruth, cheating, thievery, limitless desires for possessions, etc. are aspects of mental violence. In many instances, these lead to physical violence as well. Moreover, Jainism recognizes that the universe is full of microscopic and macroscopic living beings. Thus violence cannot be avoided completely. The Jain religion expects us to avoid intentional physical violence and to minimize the mental violence - the violence of feelings and emotions.

Foundation Of The Culture Of Nonviolence

The foundation of the culture of nonviolence is laid on the following five vows:

1. Nonviolence (AHIMSA) which consists of not obstructing the life processes of self or of any other living being. This embodies the principle of freedom and equality of all living beings.
2. Truth (SATYA) which means always speaking the truth and supporting what is true according to our own perception and experience.
3. Non-stealing (ACHAURYA) which entails not taking anything which does not belong to us, accepting only our fair share, and, being honest in business dealings.
4. Purity of body and mind (BRAHMACHARYA), which entails total celibacy for monks and nuns, and, partial celibacy - no premarital or extramarital sexual activity for lay persons.
5. Non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH) which entails limiting our material possessions and desires.

These vows help us minimize all violence, physical and mental, direct and indirect, intentional and unintentional, which we are apt to commit through the activities of body, speech and mind.

As mentioned earlier, the culture of nonviolence transcends all religions and societies. The moral code preached by all religions is akin to the five vows outlined above. The distinction lies in the rationale. Why should we practice nonviolence, speak the truth, abstain from stealing, preserve purity of body and mind and limit our desires for material possessions? The answer lies in the religious system of the Jain TEERTHANKARS - the system revived by Bhagwaan Mahaveer about 2500 years ago - the system based on the concept of reality (TATTVAARTH), on relativism (SYAADVAAD) and on the principle of multiplicity of viewpoints (ANEKAANT).

At the time of Mahaveer, the religious establishment had been taken over to some extent by certain irrational and selfish elements. Some

scholars and leaders were exploiting the masses for self-gratification. Their weapon was fear of the unknown, which they instilled in the common people by propagating mysticism. They claimed that life can be made free from pain and suffering by chanting certain mantras and performing some rituals that please gods. If a person fell sick, they would suggest a particular ritual to cure him/her; when a person started on a long journey, they prescribed another kind of ritual for his safety, and so on and so forth. They led the people to believe that through such activities, material possessions and means of physical pleasure can be obtained in the present life and in the future. They proclaimed that a person would attain heaven and would not go to hell if he/she had faith in their precepts.

Bhagwaan Mahaveer realized the lack of rationale in the above concepts and practices. He realized that performing rituals was not the way to real happiness. He observed that all events in the universe occur on account of the forces of nature. All transformations occur according to the intrinsic attributes of the elements of nature. The laws of nature govern life in the universe and there is no interference of any gods or God in the affairs of the universe. This is the concept of reality according to the Jain religion. This is what we also observe and experience. Thus, according to Jainism, we have to shed all pre-conceived notions and accept the view of reality, which conforms to our own observations and experience.¹ We have to be open-minded and reasonable. We need not accept what is contrary to our common sense, our observations and experience. Granted that there are secrets of nature which modern science has not uncovered so far and there may be aspects of truth which we might not have observed and experienced but they are not relevant to our practice of religion today. The scientific knowledge is incomplete. Nevertheless, scientists and engineers have applied that knowledge to make tremendous technological progress in the fields of engineering, computers, medicine, agriculture, etc. Similarly, the partial relative understanding and knowledge of spiritualism, which we acquire

¹ See, for example, Chapter 1, aphorisms 2 and 6 of TATTVARTHA SUTRA of Acharya Umasvati
TATTVARTHA SHRADDHAANAM SAMYAK DARSHANAM
(Belief in reality is rational perception), and,
PRAMAANANAYAIRADHIGAMAH
(Reality is understood through experimentation and logical thinking).
Experimentation includes information and evidence obtained through the study of scriptures, observation of nature and experience.

through our observation and experience, can help us practice nonviolence and advance the culture of nonviolence. This kind of attitude is a prerequisite for being a Jain.

Many times, it is said that a Jain should not have blind faith. We should not believe in and follow any person or book without proper scrutiny. Now the question arises: What is proper faith and what is blind faith? A child instinctively loves his mother. Through his life experience, he learns that his mother always has his welfare in her mind and heart. Thus a child's faith in his mother is proper. On the other hand, if a student believes that he/she can improve his intelligence and his/her grades by reciting some mantra, then he/she is a victim of blind faith because knowledge of a mantra cannot lead to the knowledge of science or literature or medicine or engineering. Reciting Namokaar Mantra, which is just a prayer, and, performing other prayers and worships are meant to remind us of the basic principles of the Jain religion. If during these religious activities, we do not have thoughts and feelings involving desires of material gains, and, if we do not indulge in passions such as ego, pride, greed, intrigue and fear, we obtain good karma. This constitutes the spiritual aspect of our religious practices. We should also enjoy the social aspect of our religious celebrations. We should promote the feeling of love, equality and fairness towards all human beings regardless of their color, creed, social status, religious beliefs and their contributions to our religious institutions. We should not engage in propagating delusion through our religious activities. Our religious institutions should not provide an atmosphere for any individual to satisfy his/her ego. Mahaveer endeavored to uproot propagation of delusion (misleading the unsuspecting masses). He denounced manipulation of the psychology of individuals. The propagation of delusion and manipulation of the psychology of the people constitute mental violence. Thus we should avoid such exploitation of the common people in the name of Jainism. We should ensure that our religion is not reduced to 'opium' for the society.²

² Many people argue: How can our religious institutions function and how can we protect and propagate Jainism if we do not indulge in such practices? We can protect and propagate our religion by practicing its basic teachings and by not compromising its principles. We need our temples and institutions and we should support them of our own free will. We do not have to be misled by the dreams of heaven and by the fear of hell or karma to support our religious establishments. This is one unique feature of Jainism.

How can we decide what to accept and what to reject? What is desirable and what is undesirable? What is proper and what is improper? Again, we have to listen to reason. We have to think and act according to the principle of relativism (SYAADVAAD) and the principle of the multiplicity of viewpoints (ANEKAANT). Relativism means that we can only know relative truth - we can only know truth as it appears to us according to our observation and experience. The concept of multiplicity of viewpoints requires us to consider a given idea or problem from a variety of viewpoints. A particular decision or action may be desirable for us but it may not be desirable for some other person. Hence, if we disregard others' viewpoints, we may end up indulging in unnecessary violence. At this point, it seems to be out of place for us to go into the philosophical aspects of relativism and multiplicity of viewpoints. Thus let us look at certain practical aspects of these principles.

Rationale For The Practice Of Nonviolence

Why should we adopt the culture of nonviolence? Should we adopt it because certain religious books preach it? Should we adopt it just because someone advises or commands us to do so? Does the culture of nonviolence stand the test of our observations and experience? Is it reasonable to practice nonviolence in the face of all the violence that is prevalent all around us? The answer to these questions is a resounding "YES". First, all religious leaders and thinkers, scholars and philosophers, sages and saints at all times and in every geographic region of the world have observed the virtues of nonviolence. Great souls like Bhagwaan Mahaveer, Bhagwaan Buddha, Jesus Christ, Hazrat Mohammed, Guru Nanak, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. have demonstrated the benefits of the culture of nonviolence. Second, each and every individual experiences the pleasant consequences of peace of mind which comes from being good, speaking the truth, having a clear conscience, etc. We also observe the ill effects of having a guilty conscience when we lie or cheat or steal. We tremble when we are in a rage. Some of these thoughts and feelings have an undesirable effect on our physical as well as mental health. These observations and experiences indicate that mental violence is undesirable. As far as physical violence is concerned, we see that no living being likes to be hurt or killed. The tiniest creature tries hard to avoid danger. We ourselves do not want to get hurt or killed. Thus it is necessary that we let other human beings live regardless of their race, color, creed and beliefs. Mahatma Gandhi said that he was

willing to die for his cause but he believed there was no cause for which he was willing to kill. According to the Jain concept, all living beings have souls and all have the same right to live without interference from other living beings. Moreover, when we indulge in physical violence, we have anger or pride or hatred or greed or some selfish motive. Thus physical violence is accompanied by mental violence of the self.

We should bear in mind that vegetarianism is the first essential feature of our culture of nonviolence. Vegetarianism not only helps us eliminate intentional and avoidable physical violence of animals but also the violence of the self. Poor health and illness lead to mental violence. It has been established by many researchers that a non-vegetarian diet is not good for our health. We can follow a well-balanced, protein-rich, low-fat, low-cholesterol vegetarian diet, which is good for our health. Thus vegetarianism is essential for minimizing physical as well as mental violence. All of us know that alcohol, tobacco and drugs are the roots of considerable violence, physical as well as mental. Alcohol and drugs impair our ability to think and discriminate between undesirable and desirable actions. This is violence of our subtle life processes, which may lead to violence of others as well. Alcohol and drugs are not 'clean fun' by any standards. Hence we must stay away from them at all costs. Jainism teaches us to avoid all situations and actions, which may lead to violence.

Many Jains say that we are living in different times. We are living in the space age. We are living in an alien environment surrounded mostly by the followers of western religions. It is said that all religions are essentially the same. The system preached by Bhagwaan Mahaveer was for ancient times in India. Is it necessary for us to practice our religion? To find a rational answer to this question, we have to observe and think from a variety of viewpoints. We have to remember that we cannot know absolute truth - we cannot determine what is best for us. As the variety of concepts described in the Jain scriptures are different facets of truth, in the same manner, concepts presented by others are also only partially true. As we can question reincarnation and the theory of karma of the Jains, similar questions can be raised about the ideas of life, heaven and hell taught by other great religious leaders. Thus if we, as Jains, think rationally and make an intelligent decision, our choice will be the supreme culture of nonviolence of Jainism. Within the boundaries of the culture of nonviolence, a Jain has complete freedom to select religious concept and practices without indulging in blind faith, mysticism and superstitions. Jains do not avoid violence for the fear of God or gods or sin or bad

karma because fear is mental violence of self. The culture of nonviolence is the ideal, which can be cherished by any intelligent, educated and rational individual regardless of time and place.

Nonviolence And The Family

We live here surrounded by the Western culture. Although the value system of the West is essentially the same as ours, family relationships are somewhat different. Here children grow up with baby-sitters and at day-care centers rather than with grandmothers, uncles and aunts. Here they cannot wait to 'grow up', make their own decisions and be independent. In India, in earlier days, they enjoyed depending on their grandparents and parents for loving care and protection. This is the age of science and technology, business and industry. In many families, both parents work. The joint family system as it existed in India, is not practicable in most cases. These are the various aspects of the situation. This is what people sometimes refer to as our youngsters facing two cultures. What should we do? Again we have to think, reason and find the solution that involves least violence of thoughts and feelings. We have to avoid situations that may lead to violence in the future. In view of the principles of relativism and multiplicity of viewpoints, we should understand that there is some good in the old system and some good in the modern ways. No system is perfect and suitable in all cases. In many cases, the new system, with all the psychiatrists and social workers and family counselors, has not been able to establish family harmony. In certain instances, the old attitudes and practices are desirable, and, in other cases, the new ideas are better. However, there are certain time-honored facts. There are instincts of mother and father for their youngsters. Even animals have similar instincts. Thus we should always bear in mind that no matter what, our parents always have the intention of our welfare in what they say and do. Thus we should never hurt their feelings. This is one family violence that we must avoid. All of us should also bear in mind that our behavior casts a reflection on our parents, children and family. Parents, on their part, should try to understand their youngsters' viewpoints and to minimize hurting their feelings. In many instances, we observe and feel that our friends behave more pleasantly than our parents, spouse and other family members. We should understand that this becomes possible because of the fact that, in general, our friends do not share the deep concerns, which the members

of our immediate family have for our well-being. Such understanding is the key to family harmony and happiness.

The institution of marriage is an important aspect of the culture of nonviolence. It spans the largest segment of the life of an individual. Thus starting from adolescence, at each step, our thoughts, speech and actions should be guided by the intention of minimizing violence of self, of other family members and of our relatives and friends. One may say that each individual is free to think and act. This is the modern approach. Well, the culture of nonviolence entails that we can enjoy our freedom as long as we do not hurt others' feelings. Many youngsters and some parents, especially those who believe in the so-called 'freedom of choice', do not mind dating and premarital intimacy. They do not like the idea of arranged marriage. Others consider love marriage a taboo. In view of multiplicity of viewpoints, these positions are two sides of the same coin. Many arranged marriages are full of bliss. Many love marriages are very successful. Even in the religious literature, we find stories of love and marriages. All those stories are not of arranged marriages. As far as modern marriages in the West are concerned, a large number of them begin with free choice and apparently with love. The youngsters make sure that they are compatible - they have similar goals, interests and habits. In spite of this, marriage counselors, psychiatrists, divorce lawyers, etc. have a booming business. It is obvious that no system is perfect. Everyone knows that divorce involves considerable violence. If children are involved, in almost all cases, their innocent souls are deeply wounded. Thus to begin with one should seek a life-partner who is compatible - whose religious and ethnic background is similar to ours, who has goals and aspirations that match our own. Life partners having a common ethnic background enjoy the experiences of sharing cultural affinity and of relating to each other's past. In the culture of nonviolence, best love marriage is one that is performed with the approval of parents, family and friends, the best arranged marriage is one, which is celebrated with the consent of the would-be bride and groom, and, divorce is completely out of question. The youngsters should choose their close friends carefully. All of us should bear in mind that after all we all are human with our strengths and weaknesses, and, anyone we marry will be a human being with his/her weaknesses just like our present spouse. Hence we should try to make adjustments, compromises and sacrifices. This will minimize the mental suffering of the family. We all will enjoy better mental health - we will be happy.

Nonviolence And Society

This is a free democratic country. Free enterprise and fair competition constitute the cornerstone of this society. How can we Jains survive without being part of the system? The answer to this question is simple. Jainism is for complete freedom of the individual. It promotes free enterprise even in the field of spiritualism. It says that we are the masters of our destiny and we can make progress in every field through our own effort. Of course, we are expected to help each other. We should indulge in fair competition and not prosper by pushing others back. Instead of being motivated by fear, greed, etc., we should be motivated by the spirit of playing our role in the service and advancement of society. We should be motivated by the love of our fellow beings. It is understood that occasionally some individuals will not like our ideas and actions and their feelings will be hurt. But we can only make the best efforts in being truthful and fair. Ancient Indian culture prescribed yoga and yajna for the improvement of an individual and of the society, respectively. Yoga implies effort for refining the activities of body, speech and mind of an individual, and, yajna is a concerted effort by all for the welfare of humanity. Our enterprise and competition should be in the spirit of yoga and yajna.

How can we practice the so-called old morality in the environment of mistrust and violence that is rampant in the present-day world? This argument is often given by some individuals who feel that one can not avoid untruth, deception, intrigue, greed, etc in one's daily life. Hence they think that one cannot practice mental nonviolence. Most of the time, we forget that violence breeds violence and that we cannot minimize violence by committing more violence ourselves. The truth is that the cycle of violence can be broken only through our practice of nonviolence. No solutions based on suspicion, hatred, mistrust, arrogance and aggression have been effective in avoiding violence such as theft, robbery, mugging, terrorism and wars. In many instances, we have observed that cries of law and order and the most sophisticated security devices have been ineffective in preventing thefts, robberies, mugging and terrorism. "Americans are more heavily armed than any industrial society. There is a handgun for every two households, one for every four citizens and we kill each other and ourselves at an astounding rate, 2000 times more than in Great Britain, Canada, Sweden or Australia," said the commentator on the NBC program 'Guns, guns, guns'. Nine of every ten-handgun deaths are caused by people who are angry, drunk, careless or

depressed. One in ten is caused by a criminal. Only one death in 118 can be called a 'justifiable homicide' in self defense. Thus guns do not provide the solution to our social problems. Further, according to Jainism, peer pressure, fear of law, fear of God, fear of sin or of undesirable karma constitute mental violence of self. Thus we should give a chance to reason, love and compassion.

Nonviolence And The World

Many political figures of the world have repeated threats of fighting terrorism. They have shown mistrust of the followers of other religions or political ideology. These have led to more terrorism and more wars, the ills that the world community wants to eliminate. Thus we Jains should keep and propagate our faith in love and understanding, and, we should be reasonable and patient. No doubt, some violence, intentional or accidental, will persist in society. However, as time goes by, love will conquer hatred and suspicion, understanding will prevail, and, less violence will be directed towards those who practice nonviolence. This is the hope of the future. Addressing the graduates of Harvard University, President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, Nobel Peace Prize-winner, said, "You will soon learn that accommodation with the old world where you see violence and injustice, poverty and submission, offers no reward." He further added, "Don't ever fear the risks you will have to take to build a different world. Don't ever fear the risks when you are acting on your own principles." Let us share President Oscar Arias's vision of a nonviolent world.

What Should We Do As Individuals?

At the time of Bhagwaan Mahaveer, some individuals claimed to be the middlemen between common people and God or gods. This was one of the causes of many undesirable practices in the society. Like all other TEERTHANKARS, Mahaveer was a revolutionary who raised his voice against the irrational concepts and undesirable practices then prevalent in the society. However, his method was one of nonviolence. Thus he preached through example, by practicing what he intended to preach. He demonstrated the effectiveness of what he preached by practicing it himself. He did not try to reform others, he changed himself. Today, the social, religious and political leaders claim to be the angels of progress and peace. But they are trying to change other individuals, societies and nations for self-gratification. They engage in establishing the superiority

of their own system disregarding how others think and feel. This is one of the causes of violence and strife between individuals, religions and nations. We Jains of today who are the followers of Bhagwaan Mahaveer, and, who are intelligent and educated individuals, should reform ourselves as Bhagwaan Mahaveer did. We should reform and refine our perception through reason and logical thinking. We should enhance our knowledge and understanding of reality through the principles of relativism and multiplicity of viewpoints. We should purify our conduct.

We should remember that untruth, ego, greed, deception, prejudice, hatred and suspicion constitute violence. We should realize that blind faith is irrational and leads to considerable violence. We should never condone any form of violence for any cause including that of religion. However, we should promote nonviolence through nonviolent means only. Consciously following the path that may land us into problems and then trying to resolve those problems entails violence. Thus we should avoid situations that may lead to violence. We should be guided by these ground rules in each and every aspect of our daily activities.

This is the view of the culture of nonviolence.

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Possessiveness fuels the pursuit of materialism, the root cause of conflicts and upheavals in the world. Once people begin to attach prominence to material wealth, the state of society starts to decline. It is sad that our institutions and places of worship are involved in a similar process. Considerable time and effort is expended in collecting funds and acquiring expensive objects to decorate the temples and idols. Our temples are places where the concept of VEETARAAG (one who is beyond attachment and aversion) is worshiped. Keeping the temples and celebrations tempered will elevate the concept of VEETARAAG. It will promote our practice of non-possessiveness.

Quotations From Scriptures, page 13