

Meeting of Minds:

Culture Of Nonviolence: An Exchange Of Ideas

By Sean DeWitt and Duli Chandra Jain

Sean DeWitt:

- I love the statement: "the culture of nonviolence entails that we can enjoy our freedom as long as we do not hurt others' feelings". I think this can be a guiding principle in marriage, in business, in friendships and in family. Too often, the path of "complete freedom" includes freedoms we enjoy are at the expense of others. This is especially troublesome to me when I think about the inequalities in living standard across the globe. To make a long story short, I think the straightforward quote above should be a guiding principle that is always in the front of our minds, and we need mindfulness of the consequences of all our actions.
- When I read through the five vows that form the culture of nonviolence, I started to consider whether these core vows are (1) supported by or (2) undermined by our global economic system. It is not democracy that troubles me, but rather the makeup and nature of the global capitalist system. Much of my work entails putting "band aids" on this global capitalist economic system to allow the poorest to survive. Global capitalism seems to reward those who put themselves before anyone else, those who take as much as possible without regard for the consequences, and is premised on constant growth in populations and possessions on a finite planet. I find the global capitalist system to undermine at least three (1,3, 5) of these core vows, if not all five. This is troubling to me. Economic well-being is so strongly tied to other factors of well-being: health, nutrition, education, freedom, etc. The core question to me is: can an economic system be designed that is consistent with, and therefore rewards individuals and institutions that act in accordance with the core vows you outline as the foundation for the culture of nonviolence? It is these truths that I intend to dedicate my professional life. I cannot predict success in finding a solution, but I can vow to explore the question.
- I also really liked the way you highlighted the purpose of religious prayers, ceremonies and facilities: to give us full mindfulness of the core tenets of our beliefs. Too often, the facilities, prayers and ceremonies are defined as "ends" and not "means" to achieve this

mindfulness. This is such an important point for people to understand, I am very happy you have raised it.

DCJ:

Thanks for your insightful comments. Here are some of my thoughts about them.

Nonviolence implies that each individual should enjoy freedom without interfering with the mental and physical being of others. It is in this vein that the phrase "the culture of nonviolence entails that we can enjoy our freedom as long as we do not hurt others' feelings" has been presented. A nonviolent person is expected to conduct the self by considering the impact of one's thoughts and actions on others and on the environment.

As explained in the 'Quotations from Scriptures', presented on page 3 of this issue, nonviolence is the supreme vow and the vows of truth, non-stealing, chastity and non-possessiveness complement and sustain the vow of nonviolence. In my view, all political, economic and social systems support nonviolence. No system advocates/promotes selfishness, greed and exploitation. However, in most cases, individuals and institutions interpret the tenets and practices to suit their needs and desires. The culture of nonviolence implies that genuine peace and harmony comes from contentment. One need not be concerned about one's fair share; let society take care of it for all.

Although, the main intent of religious celebrations should be embracing the knowledge of reality, they do have another important aspect. An individual is expected to inculcate pure thoughts and feelings during prayers, worships and other celebrations. This leads to the influx of auspicious karmas and may even lead to shedding of certain karmas. Display of material wealth, satisfying one's ego and collecting money should never be the focus of any religious celebration.

Sean DeWitt:

I understand your view that no system specifically advocates or promotes selfishness, greed or exploitation on its own. It is the people who control or act within the system that choose to act in ways that contradict non-violence. I suppose it is a question of human nature and human control over its own nature. Are we as humans wired toward non-violence? Or are we in a constant struggle internally to rise above our base primal instincts to achieve a higher spiritual reality that embraces non-violence? I think this question is key, because I believe that certain economic, political and social systems reward behavior in different ways. And some of these rewards are in line with non-violent behavior, and others are not.

An example that comes to mind is the recent development of carbon trading markets. In order to work with an overall system that focuses on money as its sole reward, environmental protection has had to be relegated to a "market" and given a monetary value. To me, this speaks directly to the dominance of an economic system over non-violent beliefs. But to your point, this is not inherent in the economic system, but has to be derived based on the actions of corporations and people within that system that act in disharmony with nonviolent beliefs. If a common global conscience could be built around the core tenets of nonviolence, I agree that any political or economic system would work fine. Perhaps then, the root solution is to find ways to build this global conscience in line with the core tenets of nonviolence, which means an increased presence of spirituality and religion in our lives. The global trend unfortunately seems to be the opposite.

DCJ:

I agree, "[The] root solution [to the problems of modern society] is to find ways to build this global conscience in line with the core tenets of nonviolence, which means an increased presence of spirituality and religion in our lives." Mahatma Gandhi had endeavored to achieve this magnificent goal.

* * * * *

When an individual voluntarily adopts the vows of nonviolence, truth, non-stealing, chastity and non-possessiveness, he/she moves closer to his/her inner self. According to fundamental Jain concepts, the intrinsic attributes of soul - absolute perception, absolute knowledge and absolute bliss, are obscured by the mantle of karmic matter associated with the soul. When the soul sheds the karmas, it is liberated and enjoys its intrinsic attributes. In the same vein, nonviolence, truth, non-stealing, chastity and non-possessiveness are innate human qualities. When an individual practices these virtues, he/she dwells in his/her inner being and enjoys genuine happiness and peace of mind.

- Quotations from Scriptures, page 1