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Department of Higher Education  
Yangon University of Distance Education**

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## The Role of Non -Violence in Eastern and Western Ethics

Thet Wai Win

### Abstract

Non-violence is, in fact, basically a religious concept but it also plays an important role in ethical, social and political affairs. There is an evidence of success in India's struggle for Independence. Non-violence as a concept is based on reason. But the origin of violence is emotion. Extreme emotional behavior can lead to wrong decision and then reason has to correct such mistakes and misjudgments. The problem of the paper is, "Why is non-violence an essential norm in ethics?"<sup>1</sup>The tentative solution is that non-violence is the avoidance of physical abuse and attacks on each other; it is a norm that teaches a person to avoid hatred and anger and thus promote love and benevolence which in turn leads to mutual understanding and mutual respect.<sup>2</sup> This can then bring about peace and harmony among human beings. It is therefore an important norm the ethics of both East and West. In this paper, the descriptive and evaluative methods<sup>3</sup> and the principle is reciprocity<sup>4</sup> is used. This paper will contribute to the understanding the solving of different problems by holding non-violence norm that will give achievement<sup>5</sup>

**Keywords:** Non-violence, physical abuse, peace and harmony, mutual understanding, mutual respect.

### Introduction

Morality is truly important for human beings, because it provides codes of behavior with regard to standards of good or bad, right or wrong and just or unjust. Morality describes the principles that govern our behavior. Without these principles, society cannot survive long. In morality, it can be analyzed into two kinds, such as: moral standards, with regard to behaviors; for example, stealing, telling lies are regarded as bad deeds and traditionally the sense of moral responsibility refers to our conscience; for example, man ought to avoid eating man's flesh; man ought to care his parents, etc. However, these deeds are concerned with moral rules or virtue, and goodness in moral and social behaviours. Thus every culture has moral values and those values control peace and harmony in the community. If there is no morality, there will be violence and brutality that will final lead to the collapse of a group or society. Morality is therefore necessary for the survival of any society.

However, the term *morality* is very sensitive and open to many interpretations because different cultures have different norms.

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<sup>1</sup> Research Problem

<sup>2</sup> Tentative Solution

<sup>3</sup> Research Method

<sup>4</sup> Research Principle

<sup>5</sup> Contribution

In the eastern cultures especially in India, non-violence is found to be fundamental principle in both orthodox and heterodox schools. The orthodox schools of Vedas and the heterodox schools of Buddhism and Jainism hold “Non-Violence” as a fundamental principle in behaviours.

In modern India, Gandhi first practically applied non-violence theory in the social and political fields. By holding non-violence policy, he challenged the British colonial powers.

In western culture, from the ancient Greek period to modern times, philosophers have put forward different ethical norms and principles, underlying all these are the concept of non-violence. For example, Socrates and Plato hold the motto, "knowledge is virtue"; it means to be virtuous one must be rational. But to be rationale a person's mentality must be free from anger, hatred, and brutality. For Aristotle, to obtain happiness a person must behave according to the golden means; golden means is to be free from two extremes of excess and deficiency. Here also, to hold the golden means a man must have a non-violent mind-set. A person must avoid excessive love, hate, greed etc. Similarly, in Kant's ethical theory of Good Will there is the maxim that states that all men must be treated as an end and not as a means. This is the essence of non-violent mind-set because a person cannot have a good motive except if he maintains a non-violent mind-set. Similarly, under J.S. Mill's utilitarianism, the essence of non-violence is taking part. The same is true of J.S Mill's happiness theory. No happiness can be achieved without the non-violence principle.

Obviously violence is a fierce behaviour that is intended to hurt or kill somebody. But peace is a situation or a period of time in which there is no war or violence in a country or an area. Non-violence is the policy of using peaceful methods, not force, to bring about political or social change.

### **The essence of Non-violence in Eastern ethics (Ancient India) Culture and Civilization of Ancient India**

Indian philosophy is essential in inquiring Oriental thought. Because the history of India is a subject that can give the innumerable facts and perspectives of past events including its society and culture, types of government and administrative systems, wars and battles, violence and non-violence, etc. from of Ancient, Medieval, up to Modern. Thus it is one of the essential disciplines of political philosophy and social ethics to understand the past and present of Asia. It, further, gives people moral lessons from the past and present and future. It, further, reminds them not to repeat the mistakes, which led to various manmade catastrophes and disasters like wars in the past. It also guides everyone why and how to ignore the bad things that created problems in society and follow the things, which promote harmony, peace, and prosperity.

### **Non-Violence as Fundamental in Orthodox Schools (Veda Schools) Vedic Civilization**

The *Vedic civilization* flourished in ancient India. It was based on the *Vedic literature* which is the most significant source of information about its civilization. The Vedic literature consists of three successive classes of literary creations, namely: *Vedas*, *Brahmanas*, and *Aranyakas & Upanishads*.

In ancient philosophical traditions of India, there are two major schools: *āstika* (orthodox) and *nāstika* (heterodox). The orthodox believes in three important dogmas: the *Vedas* are a valid source of knowledge; premises of Brahman and Atman; and afterlife and Devas. Among them the first doctrine is the most important one, thus anyone who accepts the *Vedas* as Spiritual Authority is considered to be a true *Hindu*.

The *Vedas* written in the Sanskrit language, are a collection of hymns concerned with ritual, spirituality, theology, ethics and morals which are customarily recognized to be have been a record of the visions of fully enlightened beings known as *Rishis* (the great sages).<sup>15</sup> For religion, the Vedic people worshipped the deities by considering that the deities will occupy them in the next lives. Their worship consisted mainly of offering of hymns, obeisance.

## **Non-Violence as Fundamental in Non-orthodox Schools**

### **Jainism**

Jainism, a religious tradition is well known as the Jaina Philosophy. Jainism is originated from the system of ideas and practices developed by *Vardhamana Mahavira* (540–468 BCE) in the sixth century BCE. The teachings of Mahavira have considerable overlap with those of the Buddha and of the late Upanishads, which developed around the same time. All three traditions accept the ancient *shramanas* tradition, including reincarnation, karma, and liberation from *maya*, or illusion, ascetic and meditative practices. Jainism and Buddhism differ from the yoga and ascetic practices discussed in the Upanishads. But in being atheistic and regarding liberation as an individual matter rather than involving union with a transcendent God. The three traditions are similar.

The most important part of Jaina Philosophy is its ethics. The Jaina believed that individual has to face death from birth to all sufferings. The suffering individual, for the Jaina, is a living, conscious substance called the soul. This soul is infinite faith, infinite power and indefinite bliss, only it can remove from within itself all obstacles which stand in the way. For Jainism the bondage of the soul is due to ignorance about the ultimate truths. So many kind of knowledge is useful in so long as it helps them to get right conduct. The goal of right conduct is salvation (*moksa*), which means, removal of all bondage of the soul and the attainment of perfection.

The individual soul also has limitations and these are due to the material body with which the soul has identified itself. Owing to karma the soul is associated with matter and thus its bondage occurs. Passions also attract matter to the soul. The passions causing bondage are anger, pride, infatuation and greed.

It is well-known that the Jaina ethics accepts and advocates non-violence as the highest ideal of life. In Jaina's ethics, one of the essential functions is to vow the five greats. It is called, "The five great vows". These vows are the principles of morality. For the perfection of right-conduct (*samyak-caritra*), five kinds of vows are recommended by the Jaina. They are, (1) non-violence, (*ahimsa*), (2) truthfulness (*satya*), (3) non-stealing (*a-satya*), (4) abstention from sensuality (*brahmacraya*), and (5) from greed (*a-parigraha*). These are basic rules of conduct for ascetics. For them non-violence is the highest virtue.

For Jainas, the practice of non-violence (*ahimsa*) is based on love and kindness to all living beings. It involves the activities of mind, speech and body. Men should avoid causing injury to other beings not only through the bodily activity but also through speech and mind. Mere thought of injury is as sinful as the actual act of causing injury. It is not merely avoiding injury to life in mind, but also speech and body. They also insist on avoiding injury through

indirect method. Thus, according to the Jainas, all other principles are based upon *ahimsa* and the principle of *satya* should be adopted only if it is consistent with the principle of *ahimsa*.

### **Buddhism**

The most prominent heterodox schools which hold the non-violence norm are the Buddhism and Jainism. Both of the school deny the violent actions and focus on the tolerance, sympathy, forgiveness and to hold loving-kindness. When Buddhist ethics is studied, it is the essence of Buddha's teaching. Fundamentally His teaching has Four Noble Truths, law of *kamma*, including Four Cardinal Values and 38 Blessings.

In Buddhism, monks and nuns have to commit themselves to five precepts of moral conduct. Lay persons were encouraged to commit themselves observe the five precepts of moral conduct. The first precept is to abstain from taking the life of a sentient being. Besides Buddhism had strong misgiving about violent ways of punishing even the criminals and about war. The five precepts clearly indicate not to do violence. In the same way, in law of *kamma*, it says that if one behaves violence, he will suffer again in turn. Hence, in Buddhism Ahimsa is closely connected with the notion that all kinds of violence will result in negative karmic consequences. Thus, it also teaches to avoid the violence.

The four cardinal values also lead to avoid the violence to have loving-kindness, sympathy, joy in other's success and to have equanimity. But the fundamental teachings of Buddha advocate gentleness, serenity, compassion through liberation from selfish-craving.

Thus, it is clear that the Buddhism does not accept violence and favours the non-violence.

## **The essence of Non-violence in Western ethics**

### **Ancient Greek Period**

Western philosophy which reflects of the Western culture has long history started with the great wise men of Greece, like *Thales* (624-546 BC) and *Pythagoras* (570-495 BC). Because of the intellectual endeavors of ancient philosophers of Greece, the scope of philosophy stretched into other disciplines, such as mathematics, natural sciences and social sciences including political science. Almost all of the ancient philosophers, like *Socrates* and *Plato*, were optimistic, and they enthusiastically tried to shape a democratic society in Greece, and they pointed out the importance of morality in building a social structure. Although their involvement of non-violence in Western ethics was unobvious, they truly initiated the discussions about political philosophy including ethics in politics.

### **Plato's Ethical Theory**

In the ancient Greek classification of regimes or *politeria* (constitutions) initiated by *Plato*, there are three good regimes being monarchy, aristocracy, and a moderate form of democracy. There are three distorted regimes being tyranny, oligarchy, and a bad form of democracy. There is also the mixed regime of the Roman Republic which held to combine elements of all three of the good regimes.

When the western ethical views are studied, the term 'non-violence' may not be found. But whenever the term of right reason is used, then its meaning is free from the feeling of violence.



Plato's ethical theory is dominated by "reason". He believes that a person is wise if he can control his soul (mind) from the motivation of sensual pleasure. The function of mind must be controlled by reason. It means the bodily needs must be controlled by reason. Frank Thilly in his work "A History of Philosophy" makes it clear as follows;

Reason, which alone is conversant with the highest good, has absolute worth. Hence the rational part of man is the true part, and man's ideal must be to cultivate his reason, the immoral side of his soul. The body and the senses are alien to the soul; indeed, the body is the prison house of the soul, a fetter, deliverance from which is the final goal of the spirit.<sup>i</sup>

For Plato, the individual is wise when reason rules over the other impulses of the soul. Hence, when reason can control over a man's bodily appetites, then he is temperate. Temperance, or self-control, is the master over certain kinds of pleasures and desires. Hence, when these three inward principles are doing its proper work, then the man is just.

It shows that Plato focus only on the 'reason'. According to him, a person is wise when reason rules over the other impulses of the mind. All the functions of mind must be controlled by reason because only reason takes counsel. Thus, Plato believes that a person is brave when his mind is controlled by reason following the instructions of reason what is to be feared and what is not.

Hence, it can conclude that violent mentality which is based on emotion is extinguished under the dominant of the right reason. Hence, though Plato does not use the term "non-violence" obviously it is found that the essence of non-violence is implicitly involved in his ethic.

### **Aristotle's Ethical Theory**

Aristotle puts forward his ethical theory on the principle of "Golden means". According to his principle of Golden means, violence may be a kind of excess action so that it is out of control of right reason. According to Aristotle, a person of right reason is a person who keeps temperance. W.D. Ross makes it clear in *Nicomchean Ethics* as follow:

The excess and the deficiency are alike wrong; but to experience these emotions at the right times and on the right occasions and towards the right persons and for the right causes and in the right manner is the mean or the supreme good, which is characteristics of virtue. Similarly, there may be excess, deficiency, or the mean, in regard to actions. But virtue is concerned with emotions and actions; and here excess is an error and deficiency a fault, whereas the mean is successful and laudable, and success and merit are both characteristics of virtue.<sup>ii</sup>

According to Aristotle, virtue is a mean state and the mean is being determined by reason. Thus, according to Aristotle's Golden means, violence is extreme and it is not temperate act and only non-violence is an action arisen from the right reason. Violence is a

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<sup>i</sup> Ram Sharan Sharma. (1982). *Ancient India, A Textbook for Class XI, Reprinted Revised Ed.* National Council of Educational Research and Training: New Delhi. pp. 40-41.

<sup>ii</sup> Romesh Chunder Dutt. (1906). *History of India, Vol. I.* London: The Grolier Society Publishers. pp. 147-148.

vice which goes beyond what is proper to act but it involves in emotion. Hence, the essence of non-violence is also implicitly involved in Aristotle's ethics.

### **Non-Violence and Kant's Deontological Ethics**

The fundamental problem of a modern philosopher Kant is to discover the meaning of goodness, right and wrong and duty. For Kant, man is both a rational and a moral being, and therefore reality must have both a rational and a moral character. So, man cannot live without making moral judgments and man cannot lead his life without being guided by moral ideals. For Kant, the moral law is a categorical imperative. Kant said;

Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.<sup>iii</sup>

According to Kant, in deciding whether an act is moral or not, it is necessary to determine if it arises from a motive of inclination or duty. If an act is moral, it must be undertaken purely from a sense of duty or categorical imperative. In Kant's view, there is an underlying rule of conduct or maxim for every action. Such maxims can have the form of categorical imperatives. And again, Kant said,

Act only in accordance with a maxim that you can at the same time will to become a universal law.<sup>iv</sup>

It means that an action is morally permissible only if it conforms with a rule that one can consistently and universally apply to oneself and others.

In Kant's ethical outlook, it is found that he does not deny the concept of "non-violence." In order to comply with universal law or to do with the norm of categorical imperative, a person must behave with non-violence. If a person acts with violence his action cannot be universal law. Thus, it can be concluded that though Kant does not use the term, "non-violence" explicitly, it can be seen that he accepts it implicitly.

### **Bentham and J.S Mill's Ethical views**

Utilitarianism is a form of hedonism. Hedonism means that only pleasure is ultimately and intrinsically good, and being good and being pleasurable are identical. Being good means being pleasure. Pleasure defines goodness. The passage from psychological hedonism is quite clearly stated by Bentham. J.S. Mill follows his utilitarian predecessor, Bentham. For Mill, there is, in reality, nothing desired but happiness. "Men desire only pleasure" is a psychological proposition. "Men ought to seek only pleasure" is a moral judgment. That is why Mill derives his moral judgment "men ought to desire only pleasure".

Mill advocates ethical universalism on the psychological ground. For Mill because each person desires his own happiness, therefore all men desire the happiness of all. For Mill pleasure alone is good. Happiness, being greater in amount, bring about the greatest amount of good. Hence general happiness is to be preferred to individual happiness alone. J.S. Mill

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<sup>iii</sup> Pandit Ram Sivan (SriramaRamanujaAchari). (2005). *Hinduism for Beginners, An concise introduction to the Eternal Path to Liberation*. Sydney: Simha Publications.p. 21.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.,

introduces a qualitative distinction. He prefers a smaller amount of higher pleasure to a greater amount of lower pleasure.

When the moral norm of Utilitarianism is analyzed with that of non-violence their relation is not indirectly connected as the other systems shown above. It is because in applying the utilitarianism, sometimes violence is to be employed. For example in revolting the evil monarchy or dictatorship people have to apply the method of violation. The best way for successes is to negotiate by the two parties on the table tolerantly. In such case, the role of non-violence is involved but if the two parties have hard tension it will lead to conflicts. Thus, concerning utilitarianism, it cannot be said that non-violence is out of use but it can be applied in peace negotiation problems.

### **Conclusion**

Non-violence does not just mean not doing violence; it is also a way of taking positive action to resist oppression or intimidation in order to bring about change. The essence of non-violent methods is that it seeks to eradicate antagonisms without harming the antagonists in any way. It avoids force, either physical or mental.

Non-violence has become a widespread means of protest and it is applied in various conflicts. There are two outstanding examples where non-violence overcomes the use of force and violence. They are the Indian independence struggle, led by Gandhi against British Colonialism, and African-American civil rights movement of the 1960s in the United States of America. Gandhi's non-violent protest method is a kind of movement that experimented with his ideology which is based on ethics and the religious spirits. However these are exceptional cases for in many cases might usually wins over right. Rather it is notably determined and shaped by the nature of the conflict, the culture of the protesters and both parties' humanitarian mind-set. If one party with the strength of people's majority claim their rights, and the other side denies them, but have desire to solve them by arms, then non-violent action of peaceful demonstration is often useless. For example, the Chinese people's demonstrations against Communist rule in 1989, and the Soviet Russia people's demonstrations against the Communist state were putdown by means of armed force. However, it can be said that the people won in spite of the bloodshed. So it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations about the use of violent or non-violent methods; many contributing factors have to be taken into account. From the moral aspect however, non- violence should be the preferred method. So the concept of non- violence should be first studied.

When the concept of non-violence is examined, many different types of activities are found to be involved in it. They are –

- (1) Peaceful demonstrations,
- (2) Sit-ins
- (3) Picketing (strike making to protest)
- (4) Holding vigils (stay in a place quietly, wait, pray)
- (5) Fasting and hunger strikes
- (6) Strikes
- (7) Blockades, and
- (8) Civil disobedience

Gandhi is to be called and given credit for applying the method non-violence with theory backed up by practice successfully on a mass scale for political purposes. In fact, non-violent action as a political technique is very old and it can be dated back to ancient times.

One of the first recorded uses of it occurred in 494 B.C. It was that when the plebeians of Rome left Rome for the Sacred Mount as a way of seeking remedy of their grievances. The plebeians had no rights in their general assembly though they had to manage all the affairs of the city; thus, they left Rome until they were offered the opportunities. The demonstration of the plebeians gained success by using the non-violence method. Subsequently, that kind of technique has been employed by all kinds of people, in various circumstances, on both a small and large scale. A significant expansion of its use occurred in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and in the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is related with the development of the labour and socialist movements and with other movements for national independence.

The distinct movement is the American Revolution with a variety of methods of nonviolent action, including tax refusal, and other civil disobedience employed by the rebel colonists before they eventually turned to military struggle. And another movement was that of the Hungarian nationalists who underwent a protracted campaign for recognition of Hungary as an autonomous state within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It provided one of the clearest examples of successful nonviolent action.

One particular method of nonviolent action is the strike. It has been applied in many varieties. For example, in socialist movements the strike had been used as the classic weapon of labour. Socialism could be achieved by a general strike, in the course of which the workers would take over the factories, workshops and mines, dispossessing the capitalists. The socialists believed that it would be necessary for the workers to apply non-violent method of revolution.

Those were the non-violent movement used in former times by the majority of the people who fought the authorities in order to obtain their goal but they had no ideology as a guideline such as Gandhi had. Gandhi had a tremendous influence on his people who played a major role in preserving the course of a long-term non-violent struggle because Gandhi based his method on the foundation of the belief of "**Satyagraha**" which means "**truth force**".

Gandhi is always mentioned in relation to non-violence, as he led major and long-term movements and achieved considerable successes. If all people of the world could really appreciate the value of humanity and adhere to Gandhi's non-violence method in solving social, political and religious problems, long-term peace could probably be achieved. There would be less use of armed force to resolve conflict. All the conflicts would be met on the table of convention and discussion to pursue solutions by following Gandhi's method.

The aim of non-violent conflict is to convert one's opponent; to win over minds and hearts and persuade them to the right point of view. An important element is often to make sure that the opponent is given a face-saving way of changing their minds. Non-violent protest seeks a 'win-win' solution whenever possible.

In non-violent conflict the participant does not want to make their opponent suffer; instead they show that they are willing to suffer themselves in order to bring about change. Non-violence has great appeal because it removes the illogicality of using violence as a tool in trying to make the world a less violent and more just place.

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