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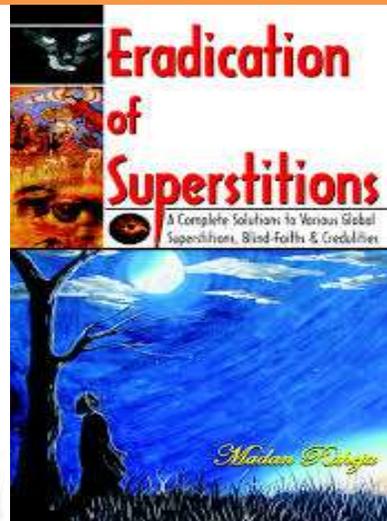
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## THE CONCEPT OF AHIMSĀ IN BUDDHISM AND GANDHISM – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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The history of mankind is the history of the endeavor of human beings to live a moral life. Moral life has not always been the same. It keeps on changing from time to time. But there are some moral principles like *Ahimsā*<sup>1</sup>, which do not change with time and place. What are those moral principles? What are constituents of a moral life? How to achieve it? Why do human being struggle to lead a moral life? These questions have always occupied the human mind. The two most dominating personalities of India, Buddha and Gandhi, have dwelt on the notion of Ahimsā as the most important aspect of moral life. The purpose of this study is to highlight the parallels and divergences in the mindsets of the two most influential persons of the world through a comparative study of the thought of Buddha and Gandhi.

<sup>1</sup> A Hindu Primer, by Shukavak N. Dasa; Sanskrit dictionary reference.

The purposed study aims to traces and establishes commonality of ideas and sources of the thought of Buddha and Gandhi. Several important parts of their thinking appear to derive from similar or shared concerns. Both of them adumbrated extensive systems of ethics within which all aspects of their thinking were organized. The principle aspects of the philosophical content of what is Ahimsā in Buddha and Gandhi have been studied and explains the salient features of their ideas.<sup>2</sup> After obtaining a detailed view of the philosophical ideas of each, the study shall attempts to uncover common ideas underlying their formulations on the same or similar subjects.

A comparison of these two great figures in world figures in world philosophical thought is significant because they derive from similar ways of thinking and cultural development. Each of them epitomizes the life and culture of vast numbers of people. Even through they lived twenty-five centuries apart, there is no doubt that each of them was, and continues to be, at the centre of philosophical and cultural thought of his civilization. Which either of followed his ideas or from which his ideas emerged. As Raghavan Iyer said, "Gandhi was, infact, following in footsteps of the Buddha in showing the connection between the service of suffering humanity and the process of self purification," and even more

<sup>2</sup> Gandhi's Philosophy of Ahimsa and Its Application to Current Conflicts.

emphatically he speaks of "Gandhi profound in reinterpretation of Hindu values in the light of the message of the Buddha."

One may try and indicate some of the ingredients of Buddhism and also show how the basic ideas pertaining to Buddha's thought underline a family resemblance to Gandhi's thinking. As Albert Schweitzer said, "Gandhi continues what the Buddha began. In the Buddha the spirit of love sets itself the task of creating different spiritual conditions in the world. In Gandhi it undertakes to transform all worldly conditions."

Gandhi said that Buddha was the greatest teacher of Ahimsā and that he "taught us defy appearances and trust in the final triumph of truth and Love".<sup>3</sup>

As in Gandhi, Ahimsā is preeminent in Buddhist ethics also. Not killing is the first of the five precepts and this prohibition includes all sentient beings from insects to humans. Buddhist conceive of Ahimsā as a positive virtue or more precisely, an enabling virtue preparatory to higher virtues. Therefore, Buddhists usually speak of these other virtues rather than Ahimsā itself. Buddhism offered metta (friendliness) and karunā (compassion) and made comparison the highest virtue, along with generality, good conduct, patience, courage, concentration, and wisdom.

<sup>3</sup> Gandhi, M.K., An Autobiography on the story of my experiments with truth.

But Gandhi allowed many exceptions to Ahimsā, based on some realistic and pragmatic considerations. According to him "All killing is not himsā", and it is better to fight an aggressor than to be a coward. Gandhi Ahimsā is reactive and flexible not passive and absolute. Thus in Gandhi's ethics, Ahimsā cannot be rule based rather, it must be based on the development of virtues that are formed within the context of the person, his spiritual stature his vocation and the various situations in which he finds himself.

The ethics of concord, peace, harmony, moderation (the 'middle way'), meditation, and conflict resolution, which are so significant in Buddha's teaching, seem to be basic in Gandhian thought also. The difference between Buddha and Gandhi lies not in their views of the ideal but in the manner which they lead people towards that idea. Gandhi goes out of the way to emphasize the primacy of means over ends.

Therefore one can see that Buddhist humanism – a humanism of non-violence and compassion<sup>4</sup> – may be the very best way to take Gandhi's philosophy into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> DB.I.79. Similarly, in one of the verses of the *Dhammapada*, (v275) it has been pointed out that one does not become noble through the killing of living beings, but through *ahimsā* towards all of them ("Na tena ariyo hoti, yena pāṇāni hiṃsati, / Ahimsā sabbapāṇānaṃ, ariyo'ti pavuccati.")

If we want to control terrorism in the world we should implement the concept of non-violence of Gandhi and Buddha, so that the people of the earth can live peacefully.<sup>5</sup>

A lot of writing has taken place on the philosophical views of these two thinkers. Each of them has been separately studied and written about, but philosophical linkages between their thought have not been explored in any systematic study. The study has philosophical and inter-cultural significance and may open new areas of research for further study *The Concept of Ahimsā in Buddhism and Gandhism* may be open new direction for further studies on morality. The study opens up several possibilities for more specific comparison.

In the examination of Buddha ideas, I shall establish how Indian civilization has derived its values from Buddhist thinking. In my study of Gandhi I shall study Gandhi's thought and identify its linkages with traditional Buddhist thought.

Ahimsā Buddha and Gandhi inspite of its appearances as a negative expression, the word Ahimsā or non-violence has a definite positive connotation which can not be brought out by any rendering of the expression into English.<sup>6</sup> In fact even in Sanskrit and Pali form, the word has the same drawback. The prefix a-

<sup>5</sup> Prachin bharater itihās by Sunil Chattopadhyay.

<sup>6</sup> Hatred never ceases by hatred in this world. Through loving kindness it comes to an end. This is an ancient law." (Dh. V5). "Who kills not, nor ought causes to be killed,/Who robs not, not makes other rob, for all/ Within his heart hath share, he hateth none." (GS.IV.104.)

in Ahimsā certainly suggest the absence or the opposite of himsā. This does less than justice to the meaning underlying this expression. While the Buddha taught that one had to inculcate and practice Ahimsā in thought, speech and action, Gandhi went further to say that the proper meaning of Ahimsā would have to be nothing less than love for others, including those who are un-friendly or downright enemies Gandhi goes on to claim that it is important to reciprocate love with love but it is more important to reciprocate hatred with love too. The reasoning is both subtle and straight forward: one cannot remove hatred from human life by offering hatred in return for hatred. Hatred can be removed only by love. Gandhi also says that one has to practice Ahimsā in thought, speech and action, but he adds significantly that Ahimsā necessarily must included the need to return love even for hatred to return gentleness for someone's abusive behaviour, etc. For our study we have to go deeper into the source of the meaning of Ahimsā and how Buddha and Gandhi derive their meaning system from Ahimsā by considering, in the case of the Buddha, his teaching as contained in *sūtra* portion of the *Tripitaka* and in the case of Gandhi, his numerous speeches and writings all of which have come down to us in the collected works in other collections and Gandhi's own copious writings. This should lead us to a rounded view of the ramifications of the meaning of *Ahimsā* in the thought systems of the two thinkers.

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