

Non-Violence in Veda and Upanishadas

B.R.Dugar

Department of Nonviolence and Peace Director, Research Jain Vishva Bharati University
Ladnun, Rajasthan, India

Abstract

Ahimsa or non-violence is a concept or an ideological tool today. In ancient India, especially in the Vedic age, it was not a mere concept but a natural feature of human behavior which required a person to abstain from all acts injurious to any form of life. To many of us it may be astonishing to hear that the concept of Ahimsa is as old as our civilization itself. The Vedic hymns contain numerous references to this thought. No doubt, the concept and definition of Ahimsa underwent various changes during different periods of Indian history. In this paper I have focused only on Veda and Upanishads.

KEYWORDS: Nonviolence, Peacefulness, Harmony, Friendliness

Introduction: Vedas are the earliest scriptures of the Hindus. Thinkers and reformers, both ancient and modern base their tenets on the Vedas. The Vedas give them a divine origin because they are considered to be direct revelations from God.

The Vedas mean supreme knowledge and are considered to have been revealed by God to the sages. As they were revealed they consisted of one hundred thousand verses and had four divisions. The Puranas say that in course of time the division got mixed up and some verses fell into disuse. The sage Vedavyasa, the classifier of the Vedas, seeing the sorry state in which these divine revelations had fallen collected the verses and in order to perpetuate them in the proper form taught the four divisions to four of his disciples. The Hindus believe that the four Vedas have come to us in that form.

The four Vedas are Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. Out of these the oldest and the most important is the Rigveda. It is actually a collection of sacred hymns in verses of different metres addressed to the many gods and goddesses of the Aryans. The second Samaveda contains mainly musical hymns meant for chanting during the sacrifices. There is hardly anything new in Samaveda which does not appear in Rigveda. Yajurveda again is a ritual Veda which gives guidance to the priests in the conduct of the sacrifice. Lastly, the Atharvaveda is a collection of incantations and popular charms based on black magic and superstition.

Each Veda consists of three parts; the Samhita or the collection of hymns, the Brahmanas or liturgical discussions and Aranyakas or forest treatises of which the Upanishads form a part. The four Samhitas are used for recitation during the performance of sacrifices. The Brahmanas which come immediately after the Samhitas discuss the efficacy of sacrificial worship and give detailed instructions about the conduct of the sacrifices. The Brahmanas are mostly written in prose. Aranyakas belong to a class different from the other two, they are meant as topics for contemplation of the people who have escaped from the world of pleasure and pain to the forest retreats. The Upanishads deal with philosophy and is also called Vedanta or the end of the Vedas. The Upanishads contain the earliest gems of Indian thought.

Ahimsa in Veda

If we make a brief survey of the socio-ethical structure of the people of the Vedic age regarding their ways of living, their attitude towards others, the basis of their morality, their feelings about other inhabitants of the society, we can easily understand that their attitude towards themselves as well as towards others was suffused with a feeling of Ahimsa. They moved in the society in such a way that there existed social harmony and congenial atmosphere for all the beings. According to the Vedic tradition, people used to share their wealth with others. This notion was inspired by their belief that those who do not share their wealth according to their conception Indra subdues them. And this was the reason that the Vedic people prayed to the Lord to save them from the ill-thoughts of harbouring enmity towards anybody and they prayed to keep off all such thoughts. They had a desire to bear affection for all in the same way as a cow shows it to her new-born calf.¹

The social structure of the Vedic society was based on the peaceful atmosphere and cooperation among the inhabitants of the society. A dutiful son was expected to be obedient to his father and to be like-minded with his mother. It was enjoined upon a woman to speak sweet and gentle words to her husband. The mutual relationship between a brother and a sister was expected to be agreeable; they used to speak with each other with good intentions.²The people were bound by a great sense of unity. They used to accomplish unitedly whatever they wanted. They worked jointly and spoke what was agreeable to each other. They liked to have a common community food and drink and were to worship Agni unitedly like spokes around a nave. They used to feel satisfied and therefore happy on the day they would be able to gain virtue, conquer evil and become guiltless. They disliked niggardliness and hatred against each other. A feeling of love towards everybody alongwith a great sense of duty and unity in performance of various deeds reflects the existence of an Ahimsaka behaviour prevailing in the society. They wanted to be dear to all whether friend or foe, noble or ignoble and loved fearlessness.

The Vedic prayers are full of a feeling of loving kindness, non-hatred, truth, righteousness and non-ill towards all. These ingredients are nothing but various constituents of Ahimsa. The people prayed to Lord Indra to instill in them fearlessness from all the quarters, from friend, enemy, known, unknown, day and night.³ Fearlessness is one of the qualities of a non-violent person. Since fearless persons never harbour ill ideas for anybody so they are fearless in themselves and they provide fearlessness to all. Only violent persons are fearful for themselves and furious for others. In praying for fearlessness to Lord Indra, people wanted to be blessed with a non-violent attitude towards all. Only them they could become fearless. Violent persons are always engaged in wishing ill to others; in turn they themselves are fearful expecting revenge from others. When a person is non-violence, i.e. compassionate towards all and endowed with a feeling of friendliness, no fear prevails for him in any quarter.

The Vedic people used to keep the vow of righteousness. They sought it from Agni in their entreaties. While praying to gods they used to say,

“I shall keep the vow of righteousness. Bless me with strength therefore. May success attend to me. I enter from untruth to truth. I abandon untruth and accept truth”.

The people prayed to gods to make them travelers on the path of righteousness and followers of honesty. They were keen to have good friends and prayed for bestowing on them good friendship. They made a devout request to God to lead them to riches

through righteous means and remove every sin that made them wanderer and stray. Apart from the desires for riches, male progeny, domestic welfare, cattle, etc., the ancient people aspired for wisdom too and prayed to Varuna, Agni and Prajapati for the same.⁴ They wanted peace within and peace without, in the sky, air, earth, plants, trees, all gods, universe, and everywhere. They wanted to be blessed with such a strength that would make all the creatures regard them as their friends and entreated gods for the same. This prayer for friendship shows the inner urge for friendliness, mutual trust, cooperation and help towards all that inhabit this universe. This non-violence attitude towards all the beings was deep-rooted in their hearts. It is noticeable in their various social and religious performances. Here are some illustrations which bear evidence as to how the concept of Ahimsa was alive among the people in its different forms.

Charity, one of the constituents of the feeling of compassion towards others, is praised in the Rigveda and prayers are offered for the welfare of those charity-minded persons who are desirous of giving.⁵ To give charity means helping the needy by providing him necessary things. To help others, to be a well-wisher of others, to become sorrowful on seeing others in sorrow and to make efforts to put an end to their misery are the qualities which a believer in Ahimsa possesses. Ahimsa not only means non-violence or non-killing as is generally understood but it also embraces in its ambit certain other qualities such as compassion, charity, a feeling of loving kindness, universal friendliness, forgiveness, non-hatred passionlessness etc.

Apart from a feeling of charity in any of the ways for the needy and the persons in distress, references are also found regarding the cultivation of a feeling of universal friendliness which is one of the constituents of the concept of Ahimsa. In the Yajurveda a wish for universal friendliness is expressed:

“May all beings look at me with a friendly eye; may I do likewise, and may we all look on each other with the eyes of a friend”.

These words could be taken to signify the various stages in the development of the concept of Ahimsa. First, a man desired that others might treat him a friendly way, then he found others desiring the same. A moral principle can be formulated when the friendly attitude is generalized, and the final proposition is:

“May every person look others with a friendly eye!”

The people of the Vedic age had an intent desire to get rid of all sorts of ill-thoughts and used to think of the day when they could win over evil and sin.⁶ They had a faith in the truthful speech. They wished and prayed that truthful speech might guard them. This devotion towards truth shows regard for morality which helps in the practice of *Ahimsa*.

Further, the ancient people believed that helping others was to liberate oneself. They prayed to God to give them strength that might enable them to protect each other, to eat and dine together, to work together, to study for enlightenment so that they might live in unity and love without hating each other. And this behaviour served as a foundation for a harmonious social set-up with an *Ahimsaka* attitude among the inhabitants of that society. These illustrations mainly from the Vedas' show that the people of the Vedic times followed the virtues of charity, honesty, peace, a feeling of friendliness towards all, and unity.

Truly speaking, the qualities like charity, honesty, peace, benevolence, friendliness etc. are a state of mind and form the constituents of *Ahimsa*. Therefore, *Ahimsa* is also a state of our mind. It may be physical or vocal from the stand point of its manifestations through different doors of actions. The decision of doing such and such act appears at the sphere of our mind and accordingly it appears through physical or vocal door and materializes thereby. If a physical act or vocal act is performed which has no corresponding link with the mind, then it may not be a real form of an act, or if we claim to practice *Ahimsa* were physically and vocally having no hearing with mind it cannot be the real form of *Ahimsa*. It may only be an external soul. The description in the Vedas is very lively and clearly states that the ancient seers practiced *Ahimsa* in real sense of the term. It was a part of their being and thinking as well as their actions were saturated with this state of mind.

Ahimsa in the Upanishads

The concept of *Ahimsa* was very much alive during the *Upanisadic age* too. The references appearing in *Brahadar-anyakopanisad*, *Narayanopanisad*, *TaittiriyaUpanisad*, *Kathopanisad*, *Prasnopanisad*, *Mundokopanisad* bear an evidence that the various virtues such as dan, compassion, kindness, self-control, practice of non-injury towards all beings, self-realization, equipoise of mind, sympathy and austerity were given importance in the society and these all in turn led to a non-violent atmosphere all around. According to *Bhrhadaranyakopanisad* one becomes good by good action and bad by bad action. The doer of good deeds becomes good and the doer of bad deeds becomes bad. Virtues make one virtuous and wickedness makes one wicked. Others, however, say that man consists of desires. As is his desire, so is his will; so is the deed that he does. Whatever deed he does that he attains.⁷ Thus people of the *Upanisadic age* had knowledge of goodness, virtue and vice. They believed in the reward of good deeds. The *Upanisads* appreciate noble will and noble desires and the nobility comes only when one's heart is saturated with the various attributes or constituents of *Ahimsa* which serve as the basis of any noble deed or any act of morality.

An interesting episode occurs in the *Brahdarayakopanisad*. The threefold offsprings of Prajapati-gods, men and demons-lived with their father as students of sacred knowledge. On the completion of their studies, gods requested Prajapati to give them his benediction. Prajapati uttered the letter 'da' which all the three off-springs understood in their own ways. The gods understood that Prajapati instructed them to control themselves-'Damayatta'. According to Sankara, gods are said to be naturally unruly and hence were asked to practice self-control to keep peace and harmony at the universal level. Men understood that they were instructed to give-'Datta'-for men by nature are avaricious and hence should distribute their wealth according to the best of their capacity. Demons understood that they were asked to be *compassionate-Dayadhvam*. The demons by nature are cruel, and hence they were asked to be compassionate and kind to all. All the three virtues help a man in his effort to perfect himself in the practice of non-injury towards all. Self-control helps in overcoming the lustful passions, charity puts a stop in greed and the practice of compassion helps one in developing feeling for others and help others who are in misery. According to Sankara there are no gods other than the man. Devoid of self-control but possessed with good qualities, man is God. Greed does not allow man to improve upon himself and keeps man chained down as man. If cruel and

bent upon injuring others, man is a demon. Man can attain all the three virtues that are a great help in realizing the true purpose of life-the self realization. A callous man may be called a demon in human form. This also confirms that infliction of injury upon others is to be vehemently denounced. A violent man is no better than a demon.

A mind of equipoise can be attained by the practice of self-denial that helps a man to face the joy and sorrow, without being elated and disheartened by happiness and misery. True compassion stands for helping others to get rid of their sorrows. It is not mere sympathy by lip. The word 'austerity' has been used for all the forms of self-control.⁸ Morality, truth, study of and listening to the sacred books peace, charity and sacrifice all are termed as austerity.

Towards the end of the *Chandogya Upanisad*, we find the parting advice to students that was given by Brahma to *Prajapati*, by *Prajapati* to Manu and by Manu to mankind. According to this advice, after having learnt the Vedas, he who settles down in a home of his own, continues the study of what he has learnt, concentrates all his senses into the self, practices non-injury to all creatures except at holy places; behaving thus throughout his life attains the world of Brahma and does not return to this world. Sankara translates *sarva-bhutanias* all creatures, both animate and inanimate. In this way, the concept of non-injury is to be extended to the animal world also:

*Bhiksanimittamatanadinapiparapida syam*⁹

By this expression, Sankara means that even travelling as a mendicant causes pain to others but a mendicant is allowed to beg for alms at sacred places. Herein is found the culmination of *Ahimsa*, not to trouble others by being dependent on them or to talk of taking life of any creature whatsoever.

In the *Taittirriya Upanisad*, references are found where the teacher exhorts students to follow truth, virtue, welfare, prosperity; to revere parents, teachers and guests as God; to practise blameless deeds; to follow teachers in righteous deeds; to give up fear-, and to practise sympathy. Students, when in doubt are asked to follow the footsteps of *Brahmanas* who are competent to judge, devoted to good deeds, not led by others, not harsh and are lovers of virtue. And this is nothing but a path of *Ahimsa*.

Radhakrishnan in his translation and commentary of the *Taittirriya Upanishad* says that the *Brahmanas* have a spontaneity of consciousness which is expressed in love for all the beings. Their tenderness of sentiment and enlightened conscience should be the standard for all.¹⁰

The aim and theme of *Kathopanisadis* is to teach charity. *Ahimsa* in reality means not to harm any person physically and apparently but to be sincere and cautious in not harming anyone. To make it more clear, one may not harm others apparently but his actions, words and thoughts, may not, in the long run, be injurious to others. Likewise, if a person gives in charity a worthy thing with faith, he follows *Ahimsa* in letter and spirit, whereas a thing given in charity by a person not with faith but only in name, discredits him as not following *Ahimsa* in spirit for in that case he is not charity minded in the real sense. *Ahimsa* demands sacrifice of all that is dear to us. *Kathopanisad* has distinguished these as two different things-pleasure and definiteness. Man's highest good lies not in pleasure but in moral goodness. Man is approached by both pleasant and good. The wise resort to good and the simple ones to pleasant, i.e., to enjoy the worldly pleasures.¹¹

The *Prasnopanisad* teaches us that Brahma, i.e., the knowledge cannot be got without austerity, chastity and faith. The seer Pippalada asked the seekers of *Brahman*, to live with him for one year more with chastity, austerity and faith.¹² A man of chastity loses his foremost quality as soon as he injures anyone in thought, word or deed. Austerity is self-restraint. A man of self-restraint sacrifices his sensual enjoyments for the sake of self-realization. He never yields to his carnal desires. To injure others in any way is to give in to a base desire. Right faith will not lead a man to such a step that may prove to be injurious and harmful to others.

Austerity, i.e., the *Tapas* is the root of the knowledge of self-goodness which is obtained by practising austerity; understanding is developed by goodness and knowledge of self comes by understanding. A body, burnt in the fire of austerity, has no cremation and does not require any *Sradha* ceremony like that cooked food that need not be cooked again. This shows the glory of (*Tapas*) that has its root in *Ahimsa*. When approached by Asvalayaua to instruct him in the knowledge of *Brahman* to free from impurities Lord Brahma advised him to seek Brahma by faith, devotion, meditation and concentration and not by work or by offspring or by wealth, but it is only by renunciation that one attains eternal life. This instruction emphasises the right faith, absence of craving for a son and money. Karma can also mean rituals that have been underestimated before the lust of meditation, concentration, faith and renunciation. Sankara also accords preference to knowledge.

As has already been clarified that knowledge of Atman requires power of understanding; power of understanding is developed by possessing goodness; and goodness is attained by practising austerity. Austerity is an all-inclusive word. It embraces all that is good and great. *Ahimsa* is to be given top-ranking position. All the foregoing illustrations clearly attest the fact that man's life is symbolically a sacrifice. Sacrifices in the Upanisads become self-denying act. For example, *Bradaranyakopanisad* opens with an account of *Asvamedha*, interpreting it as an act in which the individual offers the whole universe in place of the horse and by the renunciation of the world, attains spiritual austerity.¹³ A man of self-denial lives in the world but is not of the world. He has no attachment to worldly attractions that compel one to harm and injure others. And it is here that the concept of *Ahimsa* is realized in true sense.

Thus *Ahimsa* was considered to be the highest virtue not in the Vedic age but also in the Upanisadic age. The people of the Upanisadic age were very conscious about their deeds. They believed that bad deeds result into something bad. They followed the various virtues such as *Dan*, non-injury, equipoise of mind towards all in all circumstances, sympathy, austerity, wishing welfare for others, charity, sacrifice for good for others, non-greedy behaviour at all levels etc. They not only followed the above virtues but they also strived for self-realization based on virtues.

REFERENCES:

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3. Ibid
4. Yajurveda, XXXII. 14,15
5. Rigveda, 1,41,8,9
6. Ibid , X.37.2

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8. Narayanopanisad, P. 140, 10th verse
9. Vide Sankara's commentary on Chandogyopanisad, VII, 15.1
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12. Prasnopanisad, 1.2.3
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