

## A NON-ETHICAL CONCEPT OF AHIMSA

The purpose of this paper is very limited. I concern myself with the concept of *ahimsā*<sup>1</sup> as found in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*<sup>2</sup>, particularly as a part of his *aṣṭāṅga yoga*<sup>3</sup>, and the discussion centres round the orthodox<sup>4</sup> interpretation of the concept. It is my thesis in this paper that the concept of *ahimsā* as found in Patañjali's *aṣṭāṅga yoga* is not ethical and that it is a mistake which most of the theorists of *yoga* have made to interpret it ethically.

Not that there have been no ethical interpretations of *ahimsā*. In fact, there have been so many, Jaina<sup>5</sup> interpretation being the outstanding amongst them. In the Jaina tradition, *ahimsā* is used to characterize the conduct of an individual or a social group the aim of which is the good of every body. It is this and only this property of *ahimsā* conduct, viz., that it seeks the good of every body, which makes it ethical. This property also spells out the moral point of view<sup>6</sup>. Doing an action for the good of every body is doing it from the moral point of view; and it is such actions alone which are the subject of moral judgement. The idea of 'doing good for every body,<sup>7</sup> points to the two distinctive characteristics of a moral action. *One* that the action has social scope of a specifiable generality; and *two* that the action is aimed at welfare. As the individual is a member of some or the other social group, whatever welfare of the group is achieved is shared by the individual himself also. But, in no case is the moral action aimed at the good of the individual himself. For, then the action would be called selfish and not moral.

Sometimes, we speak of 'my having a duty towards myself'<sup>8</sup>. I suspect, there is both a linguistic and a logical mistake in this way of speaking. For *one* thing the expression "myself" is vague and ambiguous. It is vague; for its meaning needs to be specified before one understands what is being talked about. It is ambiguous; for it means anything from my mortal body, through my family, to my immortal soul if there is one and if it is immortal.

The expression 'my having a duty towards myself' carries a logical error also. It suggests that the relation of 'someone having a duty towards someone' is reflexive. This suggestion and the accompanying innocence of this way of speech thrives on the indicated vagueness and ambiguity of "myself". When the vagueness is removed by specifying its meaning and the expression is used unambiguously, it becomes apparent that someone who has a duty and someone towards whom he has a duty have to be two different persons if we are to make any sense of the relation of 'someone having a duty towards someone'. And, if I am right in this thinking, then I'll add that the logical property enjoyed by 'someone having a duty towards someone' is asymmetry which, in turn, entails irreflexivity. To say that the relation 'someone having a duty towards someone' is asymmetrical is to say that if  $x$  has a duty towards  $y$  then  $y$  cannot have the same duty towards  $x$  for all values of  $x$  and  $y$ ; and to say that the relation is irreflexive is to say that  $x$  cannot have a duty towards himself for all values of  $x$ . It follows that it is wrong to speak of 'my having a duty towards myself'.<sup>9</sup>

Having stated what a moral point of view is and also having specified the criteria of moral judgement, I think we are in a fairly good position to inquire into the question whether or not *ahimsā* as employed<sup>10</sup> in Patañjali's *aṣṭāṅga yoga* is an ethical concept. My thesis is that, within the framework of the *Yoga Sūtra* the concept is not ethical and that it does not have any ethical implications whatever. My argument follows a brief *resume* of the discussion on *ahimsā* and the role it is designed to play in the personal development of an *aṣṭāṅga yogin* of Patañjali's persuasion. Lest I should go astray, I will draw upon the original Sanskrit texts Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*<sup>11</sup>, Veda Vyāsa's *Bhāṣya*<sup>12</sup> on it and Vācaspati Misra's *Tattva-vaiśārdi*<sup>13</sup>. Translations from Sanskrit into English are mine unless indicated otherwise.

*Ahimsā* is first and the basic, and the other four namely *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacarya*, and *aparigraha*, are the five *yamas*<sup>14</sup> which taken together constitute a necessary part of the yogin's undertaking the programme of *yoga* leading through *samādhi*<sup>15</sup> to the state of existence called *kaivalya*.<sup>16</sup> *Ahimsā* is basic in the sense that all the other *yamas* are rooted in it (*ahimsāmūlaka*).<sup>17</sup>

When, however, the yogin commits himself to their observance, he commits himself *ipso facto* to *ahimsā*. To say this is to say that their practice produces conditions which tend to eliminate the occurrence of *himsā*<sup>18</sup> conduct and at the same time increase the possibility of extending the scope of the yogin's *ahimsā* conduct. In this way the yogin's commitment to *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacarya*, and *aparigraha* goes hand in hand with his commitment to *ahimsā*.

We have said that *ahimsā* is a necessary part of *yogāṅgānuṣṭhāna*<sup>19</sup> that is, the yogin's undertaking the programme of *yoga* leading through *samādhi* to the state of existence called *kaivalya*. The purpose of *yogāṅgānuṣṭhāna* is (1) continuing purification of mind (*śuddhi-kṣaya*) with (2) continuing illumination by self-knowledge (*jñāna-dīpti*) resulting progressively in (3) the perceptive understanding of reality (*viveka-khyāti*)<sup>20</sup>. In other words, as the individual's misunderstandings which are the product of ignorance are removed, there is achieved in the same measure an understanding which is the product of knowledge and this progressive process continues till there occurs a perception which ushers the individual in to freedom called *kaivalya* by the yogins.

Notice that it is not the *śuddhi-kṣaya* of one's social group nor is it the *jñāna-dīpti* of anybody other than one's own self which is sought to be removed and achieved. The purpose of *yogāṅgānuṣṭhāna* thus is not ethical but it is an existential isolation defined in terms of a specified level of consciousness. The purpose is not the good of every body, nor is it meant to be the good of the individual unless *kaivalya* (*aleness* of the *puruṣa*) is regarded as a morally desirable state of affairs, which, to my mind, in no sense of the word 'ethical' can be said to be ethical.

If *yogāṅgānuṣṭhāna* is not morally oriented conduct of the individual, far less can the conduct characterised by *ahimsā* be said to be moral. The moral point of view, namely, doing good for every body, is just not applicable to it. Rather, the relation of *ahimsā* conduct to *śuddhi-kṣaya* is said to be causal,<sup>21</sup> *Ahimsā* conduct causes *śuddhi-kṣaya* which generating *jñāna-dīpti* in turn produces *viveka-khyāti*. The ethical notions of 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong', 'ought' and 'ought not' thus have no relevance to *yogāṅgānuṣṭhāna* which is only a complex of

causal factors of *aśuddhikṣaya* and *viveka-khyāti*. Besides, moral judgement necessarily presupposes moral responsibility<sup>22</sup>. In the case of the yogin, the notion of responsibility has no place in his scheme of things. He is concerned with himself for himself in order to land himself in an isolated island of *kaivalya* consciousness. Behaving the *ahiṃsā* way for him is causing a series of events in the world of facts. Given the occurrence of these events, other things being equal, certain other events like *aśuddhikṣaya*, *jñāna-dīpti*, and *viveka-khyāti* would occur as effect. In such a state of affairs then, there is no moral judgement, no responsibility, but causality only.

Again to say that *ahiṃsā* is a causal factor of *aśuddhi-kṣaya* is not to say that it is a material cause (*upādāna kāraṇa*) in Aristotle's sense.<sup>23</sup> For, though all material causes are causes, not all causes are material causes. Veda Vyāsa, the commentator on the *Yoga Sūtra*, specifies<sup>24</sup> the sense in which *yogāṅgānuṣṭhāna* is the cause of *aśuddhi-kṣaya* and *viveka-khyāti*. Differentiating several types of causes,<sup>25</sup> he points out that *yogāṅgānuṣṭhāna* is a *viyoga kāraṇa*<sup>26</sup> of *aśuddhi-kṣaya* in precisely the same way as an axe cuts; and it is the *prāpti kāraṇa*<sup>27</sup> of *viveka-khyāti* in the sense in which *dharma* produces happiness. Besides, this causal relation has the interesting property that as the *yogin* progresses in the *yogic* growth, as the requirements constituting *yogāṅgānuṣṭhāna* are satisfied, there is in the same measure corresponding decay of the *aśuddhis* of consciousness and a corresponding increase in the *jñāna-dīpti* leading to *viveka-khyāti*. This kind of causal connection has no analogue in the moral judgement of conduct as good and bad, or right and wrong; for a moral judgement is based always upon considerations of responsibility and not of causality. In the moral realm, normal human actions alone are morally evaluated, not the natural events involving causality. On this reckoning, *ahiṃsā* is only a nonmoral property of the *aṣṭāṅga yogin's* conduct the aim of which is reaching a level of consciousness not generally available to the ordinary human mortals. The *aṣṭāṅga yogin* looks at *hiṃsā* as the effect of covetousness (*lobha*), anger (*krodha*), and the delusion of mind which prevents one from discerning the truth (*moha*); and these three in turn are effects of enmity (*dveṣa*), *dveṣa* itself being a function of ignorance (*ajñānamūlaka vṛtti*). *Hiṃsā* is the

basic *dveṣa*. By observing *ahimsā* the effect (*kārya*) of that ignorance which produces enmity (*dveṣarūpa ajñāna*) is stopped. As the *ajñāna* weakens, gradually the discerning awareness (*viveka jñāna*) is strengthened, and there occurs perceptive understanding or knowledge (*viveka-jñāna-khyāti*). The idea is this: *Asuddhi*, that is faulty understanding means not only ignorance (*ajñāna*) but also conduct consisting of actions rooted in ignorance (*ajñānamūlaka karma ācaraṇa*). The discerning awareness and actions rooted in it (*jñānamūlaka karma*) counters the effect of *ajñāna mūlaka karma* and results in *aśuddhi-kṣaya* which in turn produces, not in the sense of *upādāna kāraṇa* but in the sense of *prāpti kāraṇa*, perceptive understanding or knowledge (*viveka-khyāti*). A natural consequence of *ahimsā ācaraṇa* is that all animate things (*prāṇis*) in the presence of the yogin whose whole conduct flows from *ahimsā* cease to have animosity (*vaira*) towards the yogin and also towards one another.

The yogin looks at *ahimsā* as *sarvathā sarvadā sarva bhūtānāmanabhidrohaḥ*<sup>28</sup>, that is the abstinence from malice towards all living creatures in every way and at all times, and this for him is a *mahāvratā* (the Great Course of Conduct) which is unconditioned by class, place, time and occasion (*jāti deśa kāla samaya anvacchinna*)<sup>29</sup> and in this sense it is universal (*sārva bhauma*). Whether this kind of *ahimsā* is possible or not I do not know. But, in no case can its logical possibility be denied; and given the yogic tradition and what reasonably one knows, believes, or accepts about *aṣṭāṅga yoga* as a technology<sup>30</sup> and about *samādhi* one tends to affirm that this kind of *ahimsā* is a practical possibility within the means of man. But, surely, it is a serious mistake to characterize this concept as ethical in the context of *aṣṭāṅga yoga*.

*Ahimsā* is not even a social concept on the yogin's view. If it were a moral concept, it would necessarily be a social concept too. For, one cannot think of morality in isolation from some or the other relevant social context. The thesis that *ahimsā* is not a moral concept leaves open the question whether or not this concept is social. When I ask this question 'Is *ahimsā* a social concept?' I mean by it whether or not the *ahimsā ācaraṇa* of the *aṣṭāṅga yogin* presupposes or requires the existence of a social group in relation to which he observes *ahimsā*? On the *aṣṭāṅga*

*yogin's* view, it seems that it is neither a presupposition nor a requirement of *ahimsā ācarāṇa* that there must be a human society. And, even if there is one, the *yogin* seeks to isolate himself from it. It follows that the existence of a social group is not at all required or presupposed by the *yogin*. However, *ahimsā* is a relation. It presupposes a certain environment. A part of this environment may be human beings. But, this is not a necessary condition. For, the environment may be comprised of any animate beings.<sup>31</sup> It is immaterial to the *yogin* if this class includes human beings also. This is what Patañjali means when he defines *ahimsā* as 'nonkilling of anybody anywhere any time.'<sup>32</sup> What matters to the *yogin* is that the *ahimsā ācarāṇa* is a complex of events which as their effect produce for him a certain condition of isolation or *kaivalya* as he calls it. Behaving the *ahimsā* way thus, for him, is to bring about the causal factors which at the end of the causal sequence produce *kaivalya*.

Let me restate my argument so far. (a) *First*, I formulated the moral criterion and said that the yogic *ahimsā* fails to satisfy this criterion. (b) *Next*, I gave a descriptive account of the *yogin's* view of *ahimsā* in order to show that what counts in yogic *ahimsā* is causality, while what matters in morality is responsibility. On the strength of both (a) and (b) I observed that the yogic *ahimsā* is not an ethical concept at all. It is easy to extend my argument to all the other *yamas*<sup>33</sup> in order to show them to be nonmoral concepts such that the conduct consistent with them cannot be said to be the subject of moral judgement.

The question 'Why after all should the *aṣṭāṅga yogin* practise *ahimsā*?' is not difficult to answer. We need not bring in his motivation irrelevant ethical or social considerations. The fact is that the *yogin* does not desire to have his mental equilibrium disturbed. *Himsā* is caused by *lobha*, *krodha*, and *moha* which, in turn, are caused by *ajñāna*. *Ahimsā ācarāṇa* enables him to restore and maintain his mental equilibrium which is so essential a part of his Technology<sup>34</sup> to reach *samādhi* and ultimately *Kaivalya*. There is no question of morality in this process.

Finally, I wish to make a remark or two with a view to showing that the *aṣṭāṅga yogin's ahimsā* is quite different from the new fangled Gandhian *ahimsā*.<sup>35</sup> Gandhi used *ahimsā* in

both politics and society<sup>36</sup>; and he used it as a creed, an act of faith, and also as a policy.<sup>37</sup> Besides, on his view there is some *hiṃsā* which is absolutely unavoidable<sup>38</sup>. Many a time he tried to differentiate *ahiṃsā* as a creed from *ahiṃsā* as a policy; but he seldom succeeded<sup>39</sup>. On one point, however, throughout his life, he remained clear when he called himself "an essentially practical man dealing with practical political questions"<sup>40</sup>. Unlike the Jaina and the yogic view of *ahiṃsā* he admits cases where one adopts the policy of *ahiṃsā* because one is unable, though not unwilling, to take recourse to *hiṃsā*<sup>41</sup>. Besides, being a man of sound common sense, Gandhi does not deny the existence of situations in which the use of *hiṃsā* is futile<sup>42</sup> because the enemy is too very strong or it is impossible as for example in some cases of international relations.<sup>43</sup> Anyway, he used *ahiṃsā* as a tool of prudent political action, and therefore commended its relevance and reasonableness as a policy<sup>44</sup>. Clearly, his concept of *ahiṃsā* is quite at variance with the yogin's concept of *ahiṃsā*; and therefore the two cannot be confused with each other.

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#### NOTES

1. The Dictionary meaning of '*ahiṃsā*' is 'harmlessness, abstaining from killing, giving pain to others in thought, word or deed'. However, the word is generally thought to be equivalent in meaning to 'nonviolence'.
2. Woods, James H., *The Yoga System of Patañjali* with Veda Vyāsa's comment called *Yoga Bhāṣya* and Vācaspati Misra's Explanation called *Tattva-vaiśārādī*. The Harvard Oriental Series Volume 17.

3. Ibid, Bk. II; pp. 101-200. 'Aṣṭāṅga yoga' means 'Eight aids to yoga'. The word 'yoga', however, defies English translation. Patañjali defines it as *yogaḥ cittavṛtti nirodhaḥ*. Bk. I, Sutra 2.
4. I have in mind the interpretations which take *ahimsā* to be an ethical concept in the sense in which *ahimsā* conduct is morally judged to be good and *hiṁsā* conduct bad. This interpretation has a common currency. For reference see any standard work on Indian Philosophy.
5. The *Jaina* thinkers were the first to place *ahimsā* in the social context. For them, *ahimsā* is the first principle of moral conduct. Conduct conforming to this principle is judged to be morally good. Vāman Shivarām Apte observes : " *Ahimsā* is one of the cardinal virtues of most *Hindu* sects; the Jainas deserve special credit for making it social virtue of good conduct among the Hindus". *Practical Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Volume I, p. 302. Poona 1977.
6. Cf. Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, particularly his two formulations of the Categorical Imperative *one* concerning universality and the *other* concerning kingdom of ends. Cf. also Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View*. Ithaca, New York : Cornell University Press; 1958. References are to this edition only.
7. Cf. Kant, op. cit.; also Baier, op. cit., pp. 187-213  
V. K. Bharadwaja, *Naturalistic Ethical Theory*, The University Press, Delhi University, Delhi; 1978, p. 41.
8. Cf. Baier, op. cit., pp 215; 214-230.
9. Cf. Baier, op. cit., His argument is quite different from mine, though we both share the same thesis.
10. Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*. Bk. II Sūtras 30, 31, 34 and 35.
11. For all English Translation, see Woods, op. cit.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. The five *yamas* (abstentions) are abstinence from injury (*ahimsā*) and from falsehood (*satya*) and from theft (*asteya*) and from incontinence (*brahmacarya*) and from acceptance of gifts (*aparigraha*). See Woods, op. cit., p 178.



15. An English equivalent 'samādhi' is 'meditation'.
16. 'Kaivalya' is ordinarily translated as 'isolation'. It is isolation of the *puruṣa* from *prakṛti*. It is a level of existence where there is consciousness alone and nothing else.
17. 'ahimsāmūlaka' means 'rooted in ahimsā'.
18. 'hiṃsa' is a opposite of 'ahimsā'.
19. Cf. Woods, op. cit., p. 172.
20. "After the aids to yoga have been followed up, when the impurity has dwindled, there is an enlightenment of perception reaching up to the discriminative discernment". Woods, op. cit., p. 172.
21. Veda Vyāsa's *Comment* on Sūtra 28 : *Yogāṅgānuṣṭhānamaśuddherviyoga kāraṇam yathā paraśuschedyasya, vivekakhyātestu prāptikāraṇam yathā dharmah sukhasya, nānyathā kāraṇa*. For an English translation see, Woods, op. cit., p. 172.
22. Sellars W. and Hospers, J., *Readings in Ethical Theory*. New York, 1952.
23. Cf. Ross, Sir David, *Aristotle*, London : Methuen. 1964, reprint; p. 51F.
24. Veda Vyāsa's *Comment* on Sūtra 28 : Woods, op. cit., pp. 173-174.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Woods, op. cit., p. 178.
29. Ibid, p. 180.
30. Bharadwaja, V. K., 'The Concept of Patañjali's *Aṣṭāṅga Yoga*' *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume VIII, No. 3, April, 1981; pp. 351-356.
31. Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*, Bk. II, Sūtra 35.
32. Woods, op. cit., p. 178.
33. The same as in 14 above.
34. Bhardwaja, V. K., op. cit.
35. Iyer, Raghavan N., *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*. O.U.P., 1973, pp. 177-222.
36. Ibid, p. 184.

37. Ibid, p. 192.
38. Ibid, p. 204.
39. Ibid, pp. 192-204.
40. Tendulkar, D. G., *Mahātmā*. ( Eight Volumes ) Vol. 6, p 48.  
Quoted by Iyer, Raghvan, op. cit., 193.
41. Iyer, Raghavan, op. cit., Iyer records Gandhi's confession in 1947 that the Congress had embraced the policy of *ahimsā* because they were unable, though unwilling, to use *himsā*.
42. Kumar, Mahendra, *Violence and Non-Violence in International Relations*. Thompson Press, New Delhi, 1975.
43. Kumar, Mahendra, op. cit.
44. Iyer, Raghavan N op. cit., pp, 194-196.