Editorial
Category : February 1996
Published by Anonymous on Feb. 01, 1996

Editorial

Ahimsa: Saving the World Peace by Peace

the Editor

How can humanity achieve peace and solve its myriad problems? Is this even possible? Well, consider the humble potato. One would hardly consider these homely dirt-brown tubers a force for human change. But they may help us learn how to save the world. Let me explain. The wild potato (family Solanaceae) was gathered in South America at least 8,000 years ago and cultivated for the last 2,000. But until the Spanish invaders swept through Peru, led by Francisco Pizarro, it was completely unknown in Europe, Asia or Africa. Ironically, the gold which burdened the returning conquistadors' ship holds was mere pocket change compared to the potato they took back to Europe and which today yields crops worth $120 billion annually in 130 nations.

At first there was resistance to the strange thing. Lord Byron gave it bad press when he wrote that it resulted in a loss of sexual passion, and the Scots refused to touch it because it wasn't mentioned in the Bible. Supporters included Sir Walter Raleigh, Catherine the Great and seamen like Captain Cook (the high vitamin C content saved sailors from scurvy). Within two centuries the potato had become one of Europe's major

crops. It was hardy, nutritious (Russians call it their "second bread,") high-yielding and versatile.

Once accepted by the masses, the potato provided the food necessary for the population expansion which drove Europe's Industrial Revolution. Later, in World War II, the victory against Germany was attributed, in part, to the potato, which sustained Soviet citizens and soldiers. It literally changed history and may continue to do so. There is today an ambitious scientific effort on at the Max Planck Institute in West Germany and the International Potato Center in Lima, Peru, to "make the potato a 21st century solution to the world food crisis."

What the potato is to man's economic, agricultural and nutritional well-being, the concept of nonviolence, ahimsa, is to politics, ecology and cultural freedom. I submit that in the concept of nonviolence, man has an intellectual tool with which to cope with the current human predicament: war, environmental degradation, hunger, cultural erosion, extinction of species, overpopulation and more. That is a lot to ask of one principle, but look what the potato hath wrought.

Ahimsa, of course, has already wrought a few small miracles. It drove the British out of India and thus freed one-seventh of the human family from Colonial dominion. Through Martin Luther King, one of its greatest modern adherents, nonviolence transformed America's racial landscape.

Sanskrit defines ahimsaas, "doing no harm or damage, abstention from injury to living things, gentleness,

nonviolation." In its most perfected form, it is harmlessness not only on the material plane, but in the realms of emotion, thought and psyche as well.

Like the earthy potato, ahimsa'searth-embracing virtues can help our planetary predicament. It can do this in several ways. First by changing our fundamental approach to the problem at hand. Hinduism sees a oneness of things. It is not a question of man and his environment, but of a whole which includes man and his environment. As long as the problems are looked at as technologically caused and therefore technologically resolvable, we will simply sink deeper and deeper into the quagmire. The Western-oriented (is that an oxymoron?) problem-solver wants to do something. To prevent war, he wants to erect a space based deterrent. To handle a growing mountain of toxic and nuclear waste, he wants to bore city-sized caverns or genetically engineer poison-metabolizing microbes. What ahimsaprovides is a totally different approach, one which focuses on a change of attitude. Ahimsais not about doing good, but about not doing harm. Therein lies the real solution.

The bedrock of ahimsais that all life is sacred and intertwined. If we believe this, live it and teach it to others, then there will be no animal abuse, there will be no genocide, there will be no rampant loss of species (for we will protect their right to exist as our own). Strictly speaking, such a principle enjoins us to eat higher on the food chain, for, as the Dalai Lama once noted, "all beings primarily seek peace, comfort and security; life is as dear to a mute creature as it is to a man." All by itself, a vegetarian diet widely followed would stop human hunger in its tracks. Hindus, so familiar with the spiritual ideals of ahimsa

, can set the global example by pledging to live a harmless, compassionate life. From this example man may learn not to allow hatred to rule the heart, not to force his will on others, limit their freedoms, destroy their faith. By this one little observance many of the world's social and political tensions could be assuaged.

I can hear you thinking, "What kind of pie-in-the-sky fiction is this?" But take heart in two things. One: man has made equally radical changes in the past. Time was when no one dared to sail the open seas for fear of falling off the edge. A few courageous souls ventured into that Great Unknown, changed human perception and ushered in an age of exploration. Ahimsais no bigger a change than that. Two: man must do something or face human extinction. Fear is a potent motivating force, and it is clear that there is much to fear about the future. Time magazine once pointed out that it is man, not life on earth, that is threatened. Most species will survive anything we can foresee. Homo sapiens may not. As this knowledge gets around, expect change to follow, little by little, peace by peace.