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VOICES

Nonviolent Living

How I came to understand true ahimsa

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When asked to give a speech on the topic of "Strength and Ahimsa" at a Hindu Student Council youth conference in Wellesley, Massachusetts, I tried to come up with something in my life that exemplified what an ahimsic person was, or rather, how I was the exemplification of a nonviolent person. Of course, I didn't find anything there, for I am not the exemplification of an ahimsic person, however much I would like to be. But in my searching, I did find that, in my own way, I was leading an ahimsic life.

I'm a vegetarian. Although I am a vegetarian by choice now, I used to be a vegetarian by way of my parents. I never really knew then why I was a vegetarian, I only knew that being a vegetarian was right, because it was something my parents told me to do. As I grew older, though, I came to learn that vegetarianism is something that is taught in our scriptures. I knew that my parents thought vegetarianism was good, and I now knew that the scriptures said it was good, so I was fairly confident that being a vegetarian was a good thing.

But I still didn't know why. It took a few more years of living and growing to finally realize that vegetarianism is simply an application of ahimsa, which, by the way, is a good thing. But from my vantage point, application or not, ahimsa was ahimsa. And as far as I was concerned, ahimsa was nonviolence, plain and simple. I could see the logic behind vegetarianism and nonviolence and why they were good. So for the time being, I was content. Of course, then the problem arose of determining the true definition of ahimsa.

Ahimsa is not merely nonviolence, it is much more. Like dharma, it cannot be confined to a simple, one word definition. Rather, its meaning is lengthy and extensive. I myself am still trying to fully understand the full meaning of ahimsa. However, what I do know is that ahimsa encompasses all living creatures, not just animals. Ahimsa is compassion, caring, tenderness and love. But one can practice all of these virtues and still be not following ahimsa. For ahimsa isn't just these things. It is the application of these things to your life. How can you be more compassionate? How can you be a little more caring? How can you brighten the day of someone or something? This is ahimsa. Vegetarianism is great. Not hurting plants and animals is a very noble cause. But the form of ahimsa that I am speaking of is something greater. For when you have become ahimsic like this, then being a vegetarian will seem only logical and like second nature to you.

But who am I to preach, right? I'm just a sophomore in high school. I haven't lived my life yet, nor pondered and thought out such a profound and deep subject. But do I need to? Do I truly need to sit and ponder about what ahimsa is, and how it can uplift my life? Or has my living a nonahimsic life given me

lessons to learn from? Isn't experience the most worthy teacher? That's how you can lead an ahimsic life. Start with the little things. Try vegetarianism. Try to lead the bug out of your house instead of smashing it dead with a magazine. Once you have mastered these applications, an ahimsic life will come easily to you. Wasting food is acting nonahimsically because the dharma of food is to feed and nourish the human body. By wasting it, you are going against its dharma.

Ahimsa, therefore, is not only nonviolence, but the very essence of Hinduism, for it gives us the guidelines by which to live. Ahimsa is not an aspiration that only great men can achieve. Rather, all men who achieve it are great.

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