

[Ahimsa Meet Aims For Peaceful Future](#)

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Nonviolence Taught in Combative Sessions

Although the physical setting in India's Rajasthan state was exotic and beautiful, and the spiritual setting with the presence of His Holiness. Acharya Tulsi, one of great gentleness and peace, the Second International Conference on Peace and Nonviolent Action (II CPNA) took place when the world was in the midst of the terrible Gulf War. It is a tribute to the organizers that they were able to conduct the February event in the midst of cancellations and constantly changing airline schedules. More important than the very real practical disruptions, however, were the war's effects on the emotions and moods of the participants. Urgency, sadness, shame, despair, anger and hope were represented among the Jains, Gandhians, Americans, Muslims and others.

The conference was held at the still-unfinished Global Peace Palace, near Lake Rajsamand, about 36 miles from Udaipur. In this semi-desert state of Rajasthan, life is traditional and extremely colorful. The women, in particular, are dressed in vibrant reds, oranges and yellows and even the poorest are adorned with thick ankle bracelets, earrings and large nose-rings. Walking down the road in their brilliant cotton saris, or clustered around the village pump, the brass water pots on their heads gleaming, they evoke a sense of ancient times. Ox carts, goats and water buffaloes and even an occasional camel or a monkey mother and child added to the unfamiliar uniqueness felt by some of the foreign delegates. The Peace Palace is on top of a high hill overlooking the lake. It is being constructed of local masonry materials and employs large numbers of construction workers, for whom a kind of mini-village, with food stalls and other conveniences, has been created. Huge tents, brilliantly patterned in Rajastani colors, were set up for conference sessions and meals.

The first event was a brief audience with Acharya Tulsi who, along with a band of monks and nuns, had walked 81 miles barefoot to reach the site. While we waited for him cross-legged and shoeless, we watched monks in long, filmy white robes move around the dais, gently dusting with soft brooms so that no insect life would be eliminated by an inadvertent footstep. All the monks wore surgical-type masks with plastic backing. Jain monks and nuns are so committed to nonviolence toward all life that they cover their mouths lest their breath harm some insect or microbe. The Acharya Tulsi and his designated successor, both men in their seventies, arrived accompanied by attendants who dusted the soles of their feet as they sat down. Monks touched their foreheads to the floor. Though a few words of welcome must have been spoken, it is the sense of Acharya's powerful presence that I carry as an impressive memory.

The Conference Sessions

There were plenary sessions in the mornings, afternoons and some evenings and some small group sessions between the plenaries. One speaker observed that people from the East thought of nonviolence as a way of life, while those from the West thought of it as a technique. Both were discussed at this conference.

The Jains talked of nurturing an individual's inherent seeds of nonviolence while allowing seeds of violence to perish for lack of nourishment. Anuvrat provided sites for experimentation, and the technique of Preksha Meditation was offered as a way for an individual to become a more peaceful person. Two sessions offered instruction in the technique, which includes elements of deep relaxation, vipassana and extensive use of color imagery. Unanswered was the question of how to persuade a violent person to undertake a regime of Preksha meditation.

David Wilson, an English philosopher, defined violence "as a violation of the otherness of the other," noted its value (so defined) in helping the developing individual to establish boundaries of self and other, and asked if we were being violent in seeking to convert violent people to nonviolence. He concluded that nonviolence, while having no claim to be truth, can be espoused and taught as a necessary regulatory principle where people are to live together (as on the globe) and preserve their differences.

Narayan Desai, of the Institute for Total Revolution, saw the objectives of training as a blend of inner growth and outer skills, and called for fuller exploration of the possible powers of silence, music and working in tune with nature. Theodore Herman, Professor Emeritus of Peace Studies at Colgate University, charged that the essential ingredient that most would-be social change activists lack is courage - the courage to speak truth to power. We need to understand the nature of power, and teach whole individuals through experiential processes, some of which he demonstrated in his small group session.

Jan Fjellander of Sweden delighted the delegates by giving a talk that used intriguing visual aids, urging participants to use more right-brain or whole-person methods of teaching, and pointing out the lack of right-brain learning opportunities at this conference. That lack was partially remedied by Maciel Creuza of Brazil when she overcame the male delegates initial resistance and led everyone on a fantasy trip to a conversation with the child growing inside their own bodies. What would they want to say to him or her about the world? About war and peace? About fears and hopes?

I look forward to receiving the conference papers, but on the whole I was not inspired by the content of the presentations. What intrigued me more was the process. At this conference on ahimsa, I saw repeated incursions of himsa, violence, into the happenings.

Blatant discrimination against women extended into all phases of conference planning, operation and, of course, language. A women's caucus (quite a new idea to many) raised everyone's consciousness, produced some improvements and made a report and recommendations on the final day.

Several conference sessions were loud, contentious and disorderly. At the Inaugural Session, the organizers offered a resolution condemning the Gulf War and asked the delegates, without discussion, to endorse it. The delegates demurred, but when the organizers sought to withdraw the resolution, Muslim delegates became exercised and tried to have it endorsed immediately. That was the beginning of the shouting.

A report on the activities of the UN brought acrimonious condemnation of that

organization and equally fervent defense. Many delegates either could not or would not follow normal customs of parliamentary procedure, interrupted and got into shouting matches. In one instance the cacophony became so loud that electronic feedback turned the hall into a kind of howling jungle and the session had to be brought to an immediate unceremonious conclusion.

Perhaps any conference including such diverse individuals representing opposed viewpoints could not be expected to conduct its discussions in peace while the world was on the brink of global war. The conference could have been used as a laboratory for the creation of ahimsa, but it was not.

In spite of the acrimony, a drafting committee did come up with a first draft of a declaration to issue from the conference. It recommends that UNESCO, national government and voluntary educational organizations introduce a system of training in nonviolence in both formal and informal systems of education and calls for efforts to create an awareness of nonviolence which would lead to public pressure against huge expenditures on armaments and war. It proposes that an international committee be convened to oversee the implementation of the recommendations. The declaration was adopted "in principle" by the conference.

Conclusion

These recommendations can hardly be considered earthshaking. Were there additional accomplishments of this conference that brought together three hundred delegates from all over the globe and elicited letters of hope and congratulations from such organizations as the UN and such distinguished individuals as the Dalai Lama? I believe there were. To confer is to bear together and we, the delegates, brought together our words, accomplishments, thoughts, hopes and yes, our angers and animosities. We got an idea of who is doing what for peace around the globe. We learned from experience, too, how difficult and rocky the path to a peaceful world will be, when peace-oriented people get into verbal battles about how to teach peace. Bearing together can also have the sense of bringing to bear joint efforts, and in this sense the conference will be one more attempt, one more pressure, against the use of violent solutions to conflicts and a search for a route to nonviolence.

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