

## GANDHI, AHIMSA, AND THE SELF<sup>1</sup>

(*Gandhi Marg* 15:1 [April-June, 1993], pp. 24-36)

Individuality is and is not even as each drop in the ocean is an individual and is not. It is not because apart from the ocean it has no existence. It is because the ocean has no existence if the drop has not, i.e., has no individuality. They are beautifully interdependent. And if this is true of the physical law, how much more so of the spiritual world!

--M. K. Gandhi, Letter to P. G. Mathew, September 8, 1930

At least six book-length studies and one journal volume have been devoted to *ahimsa*, but none of them have related the principle to the ontology of self.<sup>2</sup> In his *Ahimsa: Non-Violence in Indian Tradition*, the best book on the subject, Uno Tahtinen notes the differences among the upanishadic, Jain, and Buddhist doctrines of self, but he concludes that these differences are "irrelevant for the practice of non-violence."<sup>3</sup> It seems to me, however, that one's view of the self obviously affects one's social practices. If individual agency is unreal, as Advaita Vedanta maintains, then it is difficult to see how a dynamic and engaged practice of *ahimsa* can be possible. On the other hand, if the self is real but exhorted to detach itself from other selves and from an unredeemable nature (the Jain and Sankhya-Yoga view), then it is uncertain how either real engagement with others or ecological values can be supported. In another work I have argued these points in some detail, and I have concluded that Buddhism, primarily because of its relational view of the self, is better able to present *ahimsa* as a positive virtue in the framework of a comprehensive social ethics.

Gandhi did not have a consistent doctrine of the self--his fervent individualism was always in tension with his Hindu pantheism--and I believe that contemporary Gandhians should take a middle

way between these extremes. In Section I, I examine the influence of Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Socrates on Gandhi's view of the self. Section II contains an argument that *ahimsa* should not have absolute value, as the Jains imply, but should be made, as Gandhi intimated, an enabling virtue for higher values. Section III is a discussion of Gandhi's eccentric definition of Advaita Vedanta and Ramashray Roy's misguided attempt to interpret Gandhi's view of the self in terms of this philosophy. Finally, in Section IV, I analyze Gandhi's "drop and the ocean" analogy, and I suggest that an organic analogy would better support his belief in a reformed caste system and his view that individual self-realization is prior to the salvation of the whole.

Writing to a Burmese friend in 1919, Gandhi said that "when in 1890 or 1891, I became acquainted with the teaching of the Buddha, my eyes were opened to the limitless possibilities of non-violence."<sup>4</sup> When he speaks of "Gandhi's profound reinterpretation of Hindu values in the light of the message of the Buddha,"<sup>5</sup> Raghavan Iyer sees, more than any other Gandhi scholar I have read, the full scope of the Buddha's influence on Gandhi. My thesis is that Gandhi's principles of nonviolence can be best interpreted using Buddhist philosophy.

## I

Gandhi's greatest contribution to the concept of nonviolence was to build a bridge, principally through action and only afterward by thought, between its application for the social good as well as individual spiritual development. This involved synthesizing Vedic and ascetic views of nonviolence and making *ahimsa* a powerful political tool. Gandhi transformed *ahimsa's* earlier world-denying expressions into a world-affirming *Realpolitik*, one that drove an imperial power from India. Gandhi claimed that *ahimsa* is not "a resignation from all real fighting. . . . On the contrary, . . . nonviolence . . .

is more active and more real fighting against wickedness than retaliation whose very nature is to increase wickedness.<sup>6</sup> The culmination of Gandhi's philosophy was the principle of "soul force" (*satyagraha*), and his main contention was that soul force will always, in the end, win over brute force.

The influence of Jainism on Gandhi was not as great as he or others have claimed.<sup>7</sup> His decision, on several occasions, to fast unto death, given its political motivations, is very different from the exclusively spiritual goal of the Jain fast-death. In a letter to Gandhi, a Jain phrased the difference very aptly: "Whereas your view of *ahimsa* is based on the philosophy of action, that of the Jains is based on that of renunciation of action."<sup>8</sup> Gandhi responded, following the *karma yoga* of the *Bhagavad-gita*, by saying that he had melded renunciation and action into one force.

One might attribute this difference to the respective concepts of the self: the isolation of the Jain self versus the relational and other-regarding elements of Gandhi's Buddhist-like compassion. Spiritual suicide would constitute the ultimate release of the Jain *jiva* from the corrupting influences of matter. On the other hand, a Buddhist, because of a nonsubstantial view of the self, would learn not to crave a pure self free from matter and would be more concerned about the karmic effects of suicide as the ultimate violence to the self.

With its flexibility and this-worldly emphasis, Gandhi's view of nonviolence is definitely more in line with Buddhism. Iyer states that "Gandhi was, in fact, following in the footsteps of the Buddha in showing the connection between the service of suffering humanity and the process of self-purification."<sup>9</sup> Albert Schweitzer concurs: "Gandhi continues what the Buddha began. In the Buddha the spirit of love sets itself the task of creating different spiritual conditions in the world; in Gandhi it undertakes to transform *all* worldly conditions."<sup>10</sup> Gandhi said that the Buddha was the greatest teacher of *ahimsa* and that the "Buddha taught us to defy appearances and trust in the final triumph of Truth and Love."<sup>11</sup>

Like the Buddhists, Gandhi believed that *ashimsa* without compassion is nothing, just as gold is an amorphous material without goldsmith's artistic shape or the root is nothing without the magnificent tree.<sup>12</sup> This means that for both Gandhi and Buddhism *ahimsa* is an enabling virtue in the context of a comprehensive social ethics.

Gandhi actually allowed many exceptions to *ahimsa*, based on very realistic and pragmatic considerations, exceptions that scandalized many Hindus and Jains. His view is summed up in the surprising qualification that "all killing is not *himsa*,"<sup>13</sup> and his equally provocative imperative that it is better to fight an aggressor than to be a coward. In contrast to the Jain position, Gandhi's *ahimsa* is reactive and flexible not passive and absolute. Throughout October 1928, Gandhi carried on a lively debate with various respondents in *Young India*. Gandhi defended his decision to euthanize an incurable calf, and even went on to list the conditions for human euthanasia that do not violate *ahimsa*. He also thought that tigers, snakes, and rabid dogs might have to be killed if they threaten human life. The vow of *ahimsa* is indeed absolute, but the exigencies of human finitude force us, tragically, to violate this vow every day. Unlike the casuistry of the Vedic tradition, which somehow transformed the *himsa* of animal sacrifice or military conquest into the highest forms of *ahimsa*, Gandhi insisted that we must accept all the injury we do as culpable.

In a response to queries about apparent inconsistencies--e.g., holding to *advaita* and *dvaita* at the same time--Gandhi answered that he believed in Jain view of the many-sidedness (*anekantavada*) of reality, and that his "*anekantavada* is the result of the twin doctrine of *satya* and *ahimsa*."<sup>14</sup> If one thinks of Gandhi's view of relative truth and how this would preclude one thinking ill of others with differing beliefs, then the alliance with Jain *anekantavada* is a natural one. In the same passage Gandhi continues: "Formerly I used to resent the ignorance of my opponents. Today I can love them because I

am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see me and vice versa."

Although the practical effects of such a view are obvious and salutary, it is, I believe, philosophically unsatisfactory. Ironically, *anekantavada* does not seem to have prevented Jains from holding a rather one-sided dualism, from imputing perfect knowledge to their Tirthankaras, and giving absolute value to *ahimsa*. Rather than an extremely loose "I am everything" position, I suggest that an early Buddhist agnosticism, using what I call a "neither/nor" dialectic, would have better served Gandhi's purposes.<sup>15</sup> Buddhist agnosticism led to a "contextual pragmatism," a phrase David Kalupahana uses to describe early Buddhist ethics,<sup>16</sup> but it would also be an appropriate label for Gandhian ethics as well.

Gandhi's view of the self is an interesting amalgam of the Socratic *daimon*, the Jain *jiva*, and the upanishadic *atman*. Unlike the Jains, the Vedantic Gandhi viewed the ideal self as inextricably bound up in its relations with others and society. But Jain individualism, most likely learned from Raichand, may have persuaded Gandhi to revise Vedanta in a significant way. (Gandhi claimed that Raichand, a diamond merchant and early intellectual friend, was just as much an influence on him as Tolstoy and Ruskin.) Although nominally a Jain, and taken by some even to be the 25th Tirthankara (even Raichand indulged the thought), Raichand's view of the soul is much like Gandhi's: a mix of Jainism, Vedanta, and Vaishnavism. The Raichand connection alerts us not to think of Advaita Vedanta every time Gandhi uses the word *atman*. When Gandhi says that "*atman* can be liberated only by itself," D. K. Bedekar is convinced that, because of Raichand's view that *atman* is the individual Jain *jiva*, this statement could be read as: "true autonomy of the human spirit can only be attained by the human mind which breaks through snares and repressions."<sup>17</sup> Consistent with the thesis of this essay, Gandhi and Raichand parted ways on the question of social involvement, with Raichand advocating and living strict disengagement from the world. The influence of Raichand can help us

appreciate, but not condone, Gandhi's relative ease in affirming both individualism and pantheism at the same time.

Regarding the self, one might think that Christianity must have influenced Gandhi's views. Except for using the phrases "special creation of God" and "image of God,"<sup>18</sup> this does not seem to have been the case. Iyer contends that the principal western influence on Gandhi was Socrates, from whom he derived a view of an inviolable and fiercely independent conscience. (Gandhi translated Plato's *Apology* into Gujarati.) In an impressive two-page analysis, Iyer demonstrates that there is no Indian equivalent to Socrates' *daimon*,<sup>19</sup> an "inner voice" that claims, as Gandhi said often during his campaigns, an authority higher than the laws of the land.

Iyer may be correct on this point, but it is not very clear if Gandhi's conscience is consistently Socratic. One passage on Gandhi's "Inner Voice" contains an odd mix of popular Christianity and situation ethics: "The 'Inner Voice' may mean a message from God or from the Devil, for both are wrestling in the human breast. Acts determine the nature of the voice."<sup>20</sup> Another passage gives Gandhian conscience an infallible divine sanction, independent of reason or result: "For me the Voice of God, of Conscience, of Truth or the Inner Voice . . . mean one and the same thing . . . For me the Voice was more real than my own existence. It has never failed me, and for that matter, any one else."<sup>21</sup>

Bedekar contends that, when searching for a word for conscience, Gandhi deliberately avoided the word *atman* and instead chose *antaratman*. Bedekar offers his own translation from Gandhi's autobiography: ". . . But so long as I have not directly experienced this truth, till then that which my inner self (*antaratman*) counts as true, that which is only conceived by me as true, will be counted by me as my support, my beacon, as the foundation for the course of my life."<sup>22</sup> This passage, besides confirming

conscience as the highest authority, also reveals a corollary maxim: as absolute truth is not available to humans, we must act on the finite truth we find in ourselves. It also supports the first view of pragmatic conscience above and the contextual pragmatism discussed previously.

Gandhi's commitment to individual autonomy was so strong that he unfortunately resisted the relational and social self he found in Hegel and Marx, a position that has now been confirmed and reformulated by 20th Century thinkers as diverse as George Herbert Mead, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Martin Buber. It is truly ironic that the loss of individual freedom that Gandhi feared in Hegel is immeasurably greater in the Advaita Vedanta that he unwisely affirmed. We shall return to this issue in Section III.

## II

The ancient view of a sympathetic continuum in which all things are internally related is one that the new ecological consciousness has rediscovered and affirmed. It also provided the basis for the Jain view of the equality of all souls. In the Jain *Uttaradhyayana Sutra ahimsa* is defined as being "equal-minded to all creatures and regard<ing> them as one's own self. . . ."<sup>23</sup> Compared to Hinduism and Buddhism, where there is a hierarchy of consideration (viz., higher "minded" creatures have priority over the lower),<sup>24</sup> Jainism attempts to enforce a strict egalitarianism regarding the objects of injurious action. Simply put, every life unit (*jiva*) has equal value. Therefore, Jain *ahimsa* is based on the equality and universal kinship of all souls.

This egalitarianism is a great Jain achievement, but its formulation is questionable. First, every Jain *jiva*, just as every Sankhya *purusha*, is distinct and separate from every other, so a Jain cannot, strictly speaking, regard another self as her "own self." Second, sympathy and reciprocity, along with

equality, must be necessary conditions for *ahimsa*. I believe that true sympathy and reciprocity are possible only in a system of internal relations. Jain atomism, in so far as it pertains to personal salvation, is based on external relations, i.e., the possibility of the soul to become completely independent from everything else in the cosmos. A Jain may, theoretically, be able to recognize another soul as equal; but it is difficult to see, given the Jains' insistence on absolute independence of the liberated soul,<sup>25</sup> how souls can be truly sympathetic ("feeling with" is the literal meaning) with one another. In Buddhism, on the other hand, we find that relatedness and interdependence are the very essence of reality, so that there is a near perfect match between ontology and ethics.

It is important to note that the virtue of compassion requires sympathy as an enabling virtue. It is significant that N. D. Bhargava, a Jain philosopher, defends the negative formulation of *ahimsa*, because "if we speak of love, we can <only> think of one form or the other of attachment. . . ."<sup>26</sup> (To be fair, Bhargava does insist that the use of the negative formulation does not mean that the Jain should not love.) Bhargava is certainly correct about the dangers of self-centered love, but his extreme caution on this point again reveals the radical nature of the Jain approach. By removing the self from its social and ecological relations, one can obviously remove most of the dangers of attachment and the injury that necessarily follows. But one also risks another danger: alienating people from one another and removing the content and meaning of a whole range of virtues that are arguably more important than *ahimsa* itself. Both Gandhi and the Buddha believed that without compassion *ahimsa* was not worth anything at all.

When Bhargava states that *ahimsa* is "the intrinsic nature of man," he seems to imply that *ahimsa* has absolute value. Gandhi appears to agree with Bhargava when he writes, in the words of Vedantic absolutism, that "*ahimsa* is the very nature of the *atman*."<sup>27</sup> More frequently, however, he



implies that *ahimsa* is a virtue that must be attained, and he claims that it is a means to a higher end, usually Truth or God.<sup>28</sup> In his interpretation of the *Gita*, Gandhi connects *ahimsa* with selfless action (*anasakti*), and *ahimsa* is "a necessary preliminary. . . included in. . . <but> does not go beyond" *anasakti*.<sup>29</sup> Resisting the natural temptation to absolutize it, Gandhi has ascertained the proper place of *ahimsa* among the virtues. *Ahimsa* begins in self-restraint, self-purification, and selflessness and ends in love and compassion.

Making *ahimsa* a disposition rather than the essence of the soul preserves the essential element of freedom. Gandhi frequently spoke of the animal side of human nature, and how one must struggle to choose violence over nonviolence. If we are nonviolent by nature, then we cannot be praised for choosing peaceful actions. On the other hand, we cannot be completely devoid of a disposition for noninjury, for, as Gandhi says, "means to be means must always be within our reach."<sup>60</sup> (One is reminded of Mencius' view that the virtues exist as potentials within the soul; and, like seeds, they must be nurtured for the good life to flower.) Furthermore, Gandhi frequently reminds us that true *ahimsa* towards an attacker must combine physical nonretaliation with love and compassion. (In other words, mere passivity without the proper disposition is not necessarily *ahimsa*.) Therefore, *ahimsa* must be a means to the end of the spiritual life, not an end in itself. The true proponent of nonviolence would hold that only life (Gandhi prefers Truth or God) has intrinsic value, and *ahimsa* obviously is the penultimate means of preserving life.

### III

In his book *Self and Society: A Study in Gandhian Thought*, Ramashray Roy uses the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain to elucidate Gandhi's concept of self. Roy's exposition is clear

and insightful and he introduces the concept of the relational self very effectively. Here is a sample of Roy's summary of Maritain's view:

<Maritain> considers freedom as self-activity, autonomy and transcendence of objective determination in which the conception of community happens to be an integral part of the human psyche and therefore individuality and sociality become mutually supportive.<sup>31</sup>

Roy also interprets Gandhi as an Advaitin, so it cannot be correct for him to say that "Gandhi's conception of the self is no different from Maritain's concept of person."<sup>62</sup> Gandhi's position should have been more like Maritain's, but the texts reveal a radical individualism at odds with Maritain or a pantheism that swallows up the individual.

The Vedantic Gandhi is a pantheist concerning the relationship of God and the world. The Advaitin, as John White has reminded us,<sup>33</sup> is not a pantheist, but a transcendental monist. For a pantheist God and the world are identical, but an Advaitin believes that Brahman completely transcends a fully derivative and separate world. Like a good pantheist, Gandhi constantly identifies God, the world, and life, and he rarely says that the world is unreal. He instinctively realized how incompatible such a view would be for his activist philosophy of nonviolence. If the world of constant change and social engagement is ultimately an illusion, Gandhi's dynamic *ahimsa* cannot find support in Advaita Vedanta.

An effective way of conceiving absolute monism is the prism analogy. If Brahman is white light, and the color spectrum is the phenomenal world, then the prism that refracts the light stands for ignorance. If one eliminates ignorance, then one can see that everything is just an undifferentiated one. Due to ignorance, the world and its qualitative differences have a derivative reality only. Realizing the

identity of Atman and Brahman is like waking up from a dream and discovering that those images were only fleeting agitations of the mind.

In the article cited above, John White has offered a criticism of Advaita Vedanta that goes very nicely with the prism analogy. If Shankara assumes that some people are enlightened, while many others remain in ignorance (which he must obviously hold), then clearly Shankara's transcendental monism is untenable. The world will continue to exist for the unenlightened, but somehow it has ceased to exist for the liberated ones. (As White points out, the only way that the Advaitin can answer his argument is to deny the validity of the law of contradiction.) The result is that Shankara's alleged nondualism is, at least until the liberation of all souls, a transcendental dualism, roughly similar to Christian orthodoxy. Furthermore, it means that, if some selves are liberated and some are not, there must also be a real plurality of souls--i.e., many different soul-prisms refracting their own perspectives of the world.

Gandhi declares allegiance to Advaita Vedanta, but he only interprets it to mean the unity of God and humans:

I believe in the rock-bottom doctrine of Advaita and my interpretation of Advaita excludes totally any idea of superiority at any state whatsoever. I believe implicitly that all men are born equal. All . . . have the same soul as any other.<sup>34</sup>

Gandhi, like Shankara, also extends this unity to "all that lives."<sup>85</sup> Everything in the universe contains *atman*, and "*ahimsa* is the very nature of *atman*," so Gandhian nonviolence is not only ecological, but also cosmic in scope. Gandhi's pantheism, however, resacralizes the world, while Sankara's transcendental monism desacralizes it.

Roy states that Gandhi's commitment to Advaita Vedanta allows him to have "a sense of

relatedness with other determinate beings. . . which, in turn, manifests itself in compassion, the ability to be affected by the suffering of others.<sup>166</sup> The problem with this statement is that Shankara believed that relations and determinations are ultimately unreal, which means that suffering is also illusory. Most forms of pantheism, especially the personalistic panentheism of Ramanuja and process philosophy, do affirm real differences within a unitary cosmos. Given Gandhi's love for the *Bhagavad-gita*, and the fact it does support the plurality of souls and embodies a strong personal theism, he should have preferred this view over Advaita Vedanta. (After all he did come from a Vaishnava family.)

The concept of a permanent self underlying the phenomenal self is one idea that Gandhi does sometimes appropriate from the upanishadic tradition. Roy supports this view of self in his retelling, from the *Panchatantra*, the parable of the tiger cub.<sup>37</sup> One day a tiger, while planning an attack on a herd of goats, saw a tiger cub among them. The tiger took the cub to a pond so that he could see in his own reflection that he was not a goat. After some adjustment the tiger cub eventually realized his true predatory nature. Even though brought into the greatest dramatic relief by this story, Roy does not seem to realize the negative implications of the permanent self for the practice of *ahimsa*. He should have used recent experiments that have shown that "aggressive" monkeys, raised from birth with "pacifist" monkeys, learn the nonviolent behavior of their adopted parents and siblings.<sup>38</sup>

After explaining this story in terms of the unchanging *atman*, Roy inexplicably turns to Gandhi's view that, although we have an animal nature, we can tap our spiritual natures and learn to become nonviolent. Interestingly enough, Gandhi uses the same story (substituting a lion for the tiger and sheep for goats), but he clearly distinguishes animals from humans, created in the image of God, who are free and obligated to change their animal natures.<sup>39</sup> Gandhi explicitly connects "the capacity of nonviolence" with a rejection of "the theory of the permanent inelasticity of human nature."<sup>40</sup> This means that Gandhi

should have rejected the Atman of the Upanishads, and all other Indian views of the self, because none of them, except the Buddhist, offers either the agency or "elasticity" that Gandhi required. Ironically, the tiger cub story is not compatible with any of the Indian selves, because the spiritually pure and empty *atman*, *jiva*, and *purusha* are, strictly speaking, neither predatory nor not predatory.

One of the most momentous discoveries in modern social thought-- beginning with Marx, culminating in Sartre, and confirmed in studies of feral children--is that human beings have no "nature." (This is "no nature" in the sense of nonsubstantiality and potentiality, not "no nature" in the sense of a fully actualized, but empty spiritual substance.) In their concepts of no-self (*anatman*) and no-substance (*anitya*), the Buddhists anticipated this revolutionary insight. Studies of feral children have shown that the so-called human "essence" is so malleable and so vulnerable that children raised without the benefit of parents and normal socialization are reduced to a state, sadly enough, lower than most animals. All things being equal, weaned puppies and kittens grow up to be well functioning cats and dogs, but a weaned child left completely to its own devices descends into an abyss of sensory deprivation and debilitating dysfunction.

#### IV

Gandhi elucidated his pantheism with a beautifully expressed "drop and the ocean" analogy that introduces this essay. Let us look at a similar passage before assessing the merits of this analogy for the self-world problem.

The ocean is composed of drops of water; each drop is an entity and yet it is a part of the whole; 'the one and the many.' In this ocean of life, we are little drops. My doctrine means that I must identify myself with life. . . . that I must share the majesty of life in the

presence of God. The sum-total of this life is God.<sup>41</sup>

This last sentence identifying God and life, something that Shankara never did, is the most succinct statement of Gandhian pantheism. Gandhi is certainly not the first to use water analogies to explain pantheism, so the criticism that follows is not solely directed at him.

The positive element of Gandhi's analogy is that he attempts to uphold individuation. Gandhi instinctively knew that political activism without individual agency is simply not possible. It is also true that any body of water is made of individual, but interdependent, molecules of water that offer a rough analogue of a community of persons. The problem is that individual water molecules are not perceptible, so the individual is dissolved in the whole. Except for rain storms and turbulent seas, separate individuation of the sort that persons experience in society is not found in water drops. Finally, if the analogue of the ideal state is a perfectly calm sea, there would be no significant differentiation at all. This analogy ultimately fails, for it does not present enough differentiation or qualitative difference. Gandhi is certainly correct to say that "the drop also has the essence of the ocean, so it is no small thing,"<sup>42</sup> but the content of the water is a "small thing" compared to the rich diversity of life both in and out of the ocean itself.

Spinning thread from a mass of cotton is yet another analogy of the self-world relation to which Gandhi alluded and actually practiced everyday. He was fond of quoting a saying from Akha, a medieval Gujarati saint: "Even as the thread spins out so be your life. Do what you may and receive the grace of Hari." This analogy is better than the water drop image. The individual thread is clearly separate from its origin, and its connection to that origin (for Akha it is Vishnu) is equally clear. (We may think of the individual threads taking on various colors to symbolize qualitative differences.) Bedekar sums up the implications of this metaphor: ". . . the image evokes in Gandhi's modern mind a

life-project of unrepressed and continuous activity leading one to an awareness of one's own being."<sup>43</sup>

Again the analogy has its problems: thread is woven into cloth, and it, just like the water drop, is lost in the whole.

Gandhi's statement that "corporate growth is therefore entirely dependent upon individual growth"<sup>44</sup> implies two concessions: (1) that his adoption of Advaita Vedanta was ill-advised; and that (2) the drop and thread analogies do not support such a crucial role for the individual. This passage suggests another analogy for the self-society relation, viz., that of a living organism. Individuals are like bodily organs, each with their own identity and function and each contributing to the life of the whole. This model also keeps the Socratic Gandhi from falling into the fallacy of social atomism--person-organs separating themselves, by radical acts of conscience and protest, from the body politic.

The principal objection to this analogy is that it is hierarchical and authoritarian--giving, for example, more value and authority to the brain than to the lowly gall bladder or feet, the loss of which a person can survive. Gandhi, comparing organs of the body to the four castes, disagrees: "Is the head superior to the arms, the belly and the feet, or the feet superior to the other three? What will happen to the body if these members quarrel about rank?"<sup>45</sup> One might well answer "Yes" to the first question and strongly advise the lower parts to obey the brain. If the brain did not outrank the rest of the organs, occasionally suppressing the actions of errant members, then Gandhi's *ahimsa* would never be possible. Eschewing the hierarchy of the body, Gandhi's ideal of an egalitarian body politic is the ashram, where, as I personally witnessed in Pondicherry, people, for no salary, were happily doing everything from washing dishes to speculating on Aurobindo's philosophy. Perhaps this is the way in which we ought to look at Gandhi's controversial support for a reformed caste system. "Caste" he explains, "does not connote superiority or inferiority. It simply recognizes different outlooks and

corresponding modes of life."<sup>46</sup> But if Gandhi means something more rigid--something like the tiger cub locked into his role--then Gandhi's defense of *varna* as true to the "laws of Nature" is more problematic.<sup>47</sup> The following passage is typical of this more conservative view:

Some people are born to teach and some to defend, and some to engage in trade and agriculture and some to manual labor, so much so that these occupations become hereditary. The Law of Varna is nothing but the Law of Conservation of Energy. Why should my son not be a scavenger if I am one?<sup>48</sup>

Gandhi's view here is completely consonant with the hierarchical body analogy, but it also here where most of us want to break with it. The philosophers at Pondicherry, I was told, sometimes wash dishes to clear their heads. In the human body, however, the liver or other organs have no such liberty or flexibility--nor presumably does Gandhi's scavenger who might want to become a philosopher.

The more Roy expounds on the ideal relationship of the self and society, the more it becomes clear that his preference, Advaita Vedanta, is not the correct ontological base. Shankara's philosophy does not allow us, as Roy rightly proposes, to extend "individuality in a way that all such extensions, while preserving the uniqueness, autonomy and reality of individuality, converge in a way that produces a viable social order subserving the good of all."<sup>49</sup> After such a cogent description of plural but relational selves, it is disheartening to find Roy lapsing back into absolute monism:

the prior existence of a centre and all particulars are thought to be its manifestation.

This centre manifests in the particulars which, in turn, are seen to be reflecting in it. . . .

And it is this commonality that constitutes the ground for the self to treat others as distinct but not different. It is this shareability in a commonality that constitutes the foundation of sociality.<sup>50</sup>



In Advaita Vedanta, individuals are, strictly speaking, neither distinct nor different. Roy's statement is closer to a holographic analogy, anticipated beautifully in the story of Indra's pearls. Each hologram is indeed a distinct piece, but it is not different from the whole. This produces, however, a rather bland view of sociality--almost like the drops in the ocean--each individual person, by analogy, essentially no different from the other.

Roy introduces George Herbert Mead's view that our evolving selves are constituted in dialogue with "significant others." Roy complains that the most we can get from Mead's dialectical model is a partial sociality, "which divides the world into the near and dear ones, and those who either do not count, or count only marginally."<sup>61</sup> Roy contends that only the universal egalitarianism of Advaita Vedanta can overcome these divisions. But what if Shankara was wrong, as I believe he was, about the illusory nature of qualitative differences and the ultimate unreality of selves in society?

Roy's use of the Confucian model (which is not compatible with Vedanta as he implies) offers him a way out of Mead's dilemma. The extension from "near and dear" to the "far and alien" is made by sages and leaders such as Confucius, the Buddha, Ashoka, and Gandhi. Roy does not seem to appreciate the emphasis that Gandhi placed on human finitude and its limitations. It is certainly not un-Gandhian to conclude that the best that the rest of us can hope for is to emulate the sages through a process of intensive moral education focusing on the ideals of compassion and nonviolence.

If the equality of all souls is our goal, then, returning to analogies of the self-world relationship, a revised prism analogy is preferable over the living body metaphor. In contrast to Advaita Vedanta, the prism no longer stands for an ignorance that must be removed, but a permanent window on reality that refracts our own perceptions of the world. Following Ramanuja, this aperture of the soul remains for all incarnations and after liberation as well. Finally, the revised analogy still confirms the validity of mystical

experiences: through spiritual exercise soul-prisms are able to make themselves, momentarily, transparent to the One.

## ENDNOTES

1. I want to thank Dr. Rashmi Sudha Puri and Dr. Ashok Rattan of the Department of Gandhian Studies at Panjab University for helpful comments and for graciously aiding me in locating research materials.
2. Shree Chand Rampuria, *The Cult of Ahimsa: A Jain View-Point* (Calcutta: Sri Jain Setamber Terapanthi Mahasabha, 1947); Atulya Ghosh, *Ahimsa and Gandhi* (Calcutta: Congress Bhawan, 1954); George Kotturan, *Ahimsa: Gautama to Gandhi* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1973); Koshelya Walli, *The Conception of Ahimsa in Indian Thought According to the Sanskrit Sources* (Varanasi: Bharata Manisha, 1974); Unto Tahtinen, *Ahimsa: Non-Violence in Indian Tradition* (London: Rider and Company, 1976); Indu Mala Ghosh, *Ahimsa: Buddhist and Gandhian* (Delhi: Indian Bibliographies Bureau, 1988). There is also a special issue of *Journal of Dharma* 16:3 (July-September, 1991) devoted to *ahimsa*. Nathaniel Altman's *Ahimsa: Dynamic Compassion* (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980) is just an anthology of materials relating to nonviolence.
3. Tahtinen, op. cit., p. 44. He argues that the inconsistencies among the three views can be overcome by moving from ontology to axiology, where Vedantist totality is seen as "an ideal to be observed in action, not as a fact of reality" (ibid.) Tahtinen himself realizes that this is not the view of Vedanta, at least in its nondualist versions.
4. Quoted in Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 226. In a speech in Mandalay in 1929 Gautama told his audience that using Buddhism they should "explore the limitless possibilities of nonviolence" (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* <New Delhi: Government of India Publications, 1959>, vol. 40, p. 159). It should be mentioned that Gandhi viewed both Jainism and Buddhism as reform movements within Hinduism, not separate religions. Gandhi declared that he was proud of the accusation (lodged by his own son) that he was a closet Buddhist, and that Buddhism is to Hinduism as Protestantism is to Roman Catholicism "only in a much stronger light, in a much greater degree" (*Collected Works*, vol. 40, p. 104).
5. Iyer, op. cit., p. 49.
6. Gandhi, *Non-Violence in Peace and War* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1942), vol. 1, p. 48.
7. Stephen N. Hay is the principal proponent of Jain influences on Gandhi. While his two articles are well-researched, his conclusion that Gandhi learned the importance of spiritual self-purification from Jainism is not convincing. This goal is of course one that is common to the major religions of India. See Hay's "Jain Influences on Gandhi's Early Thought" in *Gandhi, India, and the World*, ed. S. Ray (Bombay: Nachiketa Publishers, 1970), pp. 14-23; and "Jaina Goals and Disciplines in Gandhi's Pursuit of Swaraj" in *Rule, Protest, and Identity*, ed. Peter Robb and David Taylor (London: Curzon Press, 1978), pp. 120-132.
8. *Young India* (October 25, 1928), p. 356.
9. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought*, p. 49.
10. Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, trans. Mrs. Charles E. B. Russell (Bombay: Wilco Publishing House, 1960), p. 231.

11. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 40, p. 160; speech at a Buddha Jayanti meeting in Bombay on May 18, 1924 in *The Collected Works*, vol. 24, p. 86. Also significant is his passion for Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, a popular life of the Buddha. In his autobiography he tells of his vain attempt to persuade some Christian friends that the Buddha's compassion was greater than Jesus'. See *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. M. Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1989), pp. 133-34.
12. *Navajivan* (March 31, 1929), trans. in *Collected Works*, vol. 40, pp. 191-92.
13. *Collected Works*, vol. 13, p. 232.
14. *Young India* (January 21, 1926), p. 30.
15. See my "Dialectic: East and West," *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* 10(January, 1983), pp. 207-218.
16. David J. Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 174.
17. Bedekar, op. cit., p. 80. In a very insightful analysis, Bedekar suggests that Gandhi discovered that the "spell" of Vedanta had compromised his commitment to individual agency and engagement (p. 115). According to Stephen Hay, Raichand uses the term *atman* only to start a dialogue with the Hindu Gandhi, not to adopt it as his own ("Jain Influences on Gandhi's Early Thought", p. 19). In terms of Hay's thesis of Jain influence it is significant that Gandhi did not adopt Jain terminology.
18. *Young India* (February 13, 1930), p. 56; *Young India* (July 8, 1926), p. 244.
19. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought*, pp. 131-32. There is no equivalent to Socratic *daimon* in Buddhism either, at least in the Pali scriptures. See I. B. Horner, *The Early Buddhist Theory of Man Perfected: A Study of the Arahan* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1936), p. 146.
20. *Young India* (February 13, 1930), p. 56. "My claim to hear the Voice of God is no new claim. Unfortunately, there is no way that I know of proving the claim except through results" (*Harijan*, May 6, 1933, p. 4).
21. Gandhi, *Harijan* (July 8, 1933), p. 4. "Before one is able to listen to that Voice, one has to go through a long and fairly severe course of training, and when it is the Inner Voice that speaks, it is unmistakable" (*Harijan*, March 18, 1933, p. 8). When Gandhi describes the Voice as coming upon him and causing "a terrific struggle" in him, this is more in line with a new view of Socrates' *daimon* as the voice of God. This interpretation challenges the view that Socrates saw his inner voice as the dictates of autonomous moral reason. (See Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy: From the Origins to Socrates*, ed. and trans. John R. Catan <Albany: SUNY Press, 1987>, vol. 1, pp. 232-35.) Gandhi's theism is especially strong in one article where he says that although some may call conscience the "dictates of reason," it is really God's direct command (*The Bombay Chronicle*, November 18, 1933 reprinted in *Truth is God*, ed. R. K. Prabhu <Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1955>, p. 29).
22. Bedekar, op. cit., p. 117. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, p. xi.
23. Quoted in Kotturan, op. cit., p. 13. "No matter whether he is Svetambara, or Digambara, a Buddhist or follower of any other creed, one who looks on all creatures as his own self, attains salvation" (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 12).
24. See A. Siddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics: Essence of Buddhism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), p. 88; *Bhagavada Purana* 3.29.28-32. Jainism does allow that if one cannot uphold the vow of noninjury to immobile beings, then one must at least maintain it for mobile beings.

25. N. D. Bhargava states that "the world of relationship is a world of attachment and aversion. But non-violence is possible and possible only without interrelationship, because interrelationship is dependent on others and cannot be natural." See Bhargava's "Some Chief Characteristics of the Jain Concept of Nonviolence" in *The Contribution of Jainism to Indian Culture*, ed. R. C. Divivedi (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), p. 124.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
27. Gandhi, letter to Bhai Prithvi Singh, October 2, 1941 in Raghavan Iyer, ed., *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford University Press, 3 vols., 1986), vol. 2, p. 251.
28. "Nevertheless, Ahimsa is the means, Truth is the end" (*From Yeravda Mandir*, trans. V. G. Desai <Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1945>, p. 8). In his autobiography, Gandhi says that the "only means for the realization of Truth is Ahimsa. . . ." (*The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, p. 419; cf. p. 230). For *ahimsa* as a virtue see *Harijan* (October 8, 1939), p. 282.
29. *Harijan* (September 1, 1940), p. 266. He also says that *anasakti* "transcends *ahimsa*." Elsewhere he states: "We find that the fulfilment of Ahimsa is impossible without utter selflessness. Ahimsa means Universal Love" (*From Yeravda Mandir*, p. 10).
30. Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir*, p. 8.
31. Ramashray Roy, *Self and Society: A Study in Gandhian Thought* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1985), p. 95.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
33. John D. White, "God and the World from the Viewpoint of Advaita Vedanta: A Critical Assessment," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 30:2(June, 1981), pp. 185-193.
34. Gandhi, Speech at Tanjore on September 16, 1927 in *Collected Works*, vol. 35, p. 1. Feeling "one with God" is "the principle of *advaita*" (a letter to Chi. Maganlal, May 18, 1918 in Iyer, *The Moral and Political Writings*, vol. 2, p. 290).
35. Gandhi, *Young India* (December 4, 1924), p. 398.
36. Roy, op. cit., p. 74.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
38. Lovers of the orangutan will not appreciate Gandhi's reference to this peaceful creature as an example of what will happen to us if we do not practice *ahimsa*! See *Harijan* (October 8, 1938), p. 282.
39. *Young India*, July 8, 1926, p. 244.
40. *Harijan* (June 7, 1942), p. 177.
41. *Harijan* (February 15, 1948), p. 33.
42. Gandhi, letter to Bhai Prithvi Singh (October 2, 1941) in Iyer, *Moral and Political Writings*, vol. 2, p. 250.
43. Bedekar, op. cit., p. 81.

- 44 . Gandhi, *The Hindu* (September 12, 1927) in *Collected Works*, vol. 34, p. 505. The preceding sentence "there is no distinction whatever between individual growth and corporate growth" might imply absolute monism, but the sentence cited makes it clear what Gandhi's meaning is.
- 45 . *Harijan* (September 28, 1934), p. 258.
- 46 . Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. 19, p. 175.
- 47 . Gandhi, *Young India* (January 21, 1926), p. 30. The long passage here is filled with unfortunate implications of differences "inherent in human nature" and the "law of heredity." These comments mitigate the effect of his otherwise laudable comments about a brahmin doing a sudra's work.
- 48 . *Harijan* (March 6, 1937), p. 27. In the same source a questioner counters that, according to this logic, Abraham Lincoln should not have aspired to become president of the United States. Gandhi only deflects the question by answering, unsatisfactorily, that the scavenger, as long as he keeps his profession, can otherwise be anything that he wants to be. Gandhi does allow one exception to the Law of Varna: we must follow the professions of our fathers "in so far as that traditional calling is not inconsistent with fundamental ethics" (*Young India*, October 20, 1927, p. 355).
- 49 . Roy, op. cit., p. 92.
- 50 . Ibid., p. 93.
- 51 . Ibid., p. 100.