

**GANDHI AND MAHAYANA BUDDHISM:
A HUMANISM OF
NONVIOLENCE AND COMPASSION**

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At Gandhi's call all India blossomed forth to new greatness, just as once before, in earlier times, when [the] Buddha proclaimed the truth of fellow feeling and compassion among all living creatures.

--Rabindranath Tagore

[Gandhi is] the greatest Indian since Gautama Buddha and the greatest man since Jesus Christ.

--J. H. Holmes

J. H. Holmes and D. S. Harrington *The Enduring Greatness of Gandhi* (Navajivan, 1982), p. 275.

I felt I was in the presence of a noble soul . . . a true disciple of Lord Buddha and a true believer in peace and harmony among all men.

--The Dalai Lama

It was not until he reached England that Gandhi discovered the great religious classics of his own Indian tradition. He first read the *Bhagavad-gītā*¹ in Sir Edwin Arnold's translation, and he read with "even greater interest" Arnold's verse rendition of the Buddha's life and thought.¹ 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 nonviolence."² Gandhi declared that he was proud of the accusation (lodged by his own son) that he was a closet Buddhist, and he claimed that Buddhism was to Hinduism as Protestantism was to Roman Catholicism "only in a much stronger light, in a much greater degree."³ This comment represents a slight against Roman Catholicism, which currently has the most compassionate and most understanding Christian mission in Asia; and it also reveals Gandhi's mistaken belief that Buddhism, along with Jainism, are simply reform movements within Hinduism.

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."⁴ When he speaks of "Gandhi's profound reinterpretation of Hindu values in the light of the message of the Buddha,"⁵ Raghavan Iyer sees, more than any other Gandhi scholar I have read, the full scope of the Buddha's influence on Gandhi. Observing that Gandhi establishes a middle path between Jain individualism and the Vedantist dissolution of the individual, Margaret Chatterjee maintains that Gandhi's position most closely resembles Mahayana Buddhism.⁶ In my own work with Gandhi⁷ I have gone several steps beyond Iyer and Chatterjee to propose that Gandhi's principles of nonviolence can be best interpreted by extensive use of Buddhist philosophy.

In this paper I would like to cover several topics related to Gandhi and Buddhism. First, I would like to address the problems regarding Gandhi's misconceptions about Buddhism. Second, I will explore parallels between Gandhi's philosophy and Mahayana

Buddhism. The main focus will be a discussion of Gandhi's principle of self-suffering and how it differs from the Bodhisattva ideal. Third, focusing on the thoroughly empirical method of Gandhi's experiments in truth, I will suggest a constructive comparison with the Buddha's famous claim that "those who know causation know the Dharma." Fourth, I will discuss the relationship between morality and beauty and show how this relates to a Buddhist-Gandhian virtue ethics. In the last section I argue that commentators who interpret Gandhi as a follower of Advaita Vedānta cannot do justice to his firm commitment to the individual and cannot make sense out of his political activism. With this preservation of individuality, it is possible to propose, as I do in the last section, a convergence of Gandhian and Buddhist humanism--a humanism of nonviolence and compassion.

GANDHI'S MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT BUDDHISM

During November, 1927, Gandhi was on tour in Sri Lanka, and he naturally had occasion to present his views on Buddhism. Gandhi maintained that the Buddha's extreme austerities during the time before his enlightenment were done as penance for the sins of corrupt brahmin priests. Using the time-honored practice of *tapasya*^{1,8} the Buddha, according to Gandhi, had only one principal goal: to convince Hindus to give up animal sacrifice. With remarkable candor Gandhi told his Buddhist audience that he was shocked that they could justify eating the flesh of animals that they themselves had not killed. He claimed that vegetarian Hindus were more consistent in their adherence to *ahimsa*¹ and were thereby the true heirs of the Buddha's gospel of nonviolence. Reminding them of the

Buddha's principle of dependent origination, Gandhi told his audience that any meat eater is causally linked to the violence of the one who butchers the animal. His judgment against Burmese Buddhists in 1929 was equally harsh, and there he speculated that meat eating was the reason why Burma had a higher crime rate than India.

In his first speech in Sri Lanka Gandhi said that the Buddha only meant to reform Hinduism and not start a new religion of his own. It was his disciples, not the Buddha, who established a religion separate from Hinduism. According to Gandhi, the Buddha never rejected Hinduism; rather, he "broadened its base. He gave it new life and a new interpretation." And most incredibly Gandhi claims that any element of Buddhism not assimilated by Hinduism "was not an essential part of the Buddha's life and teaching."⁹ Unfortunately, Gandhi's effusive praise for Buddhism is rather back-handed, because he unwittingly eliminates the separate identity that it rightly deserves: "It can be said that, in India at any rate, Hinduism and Buddhism were but one, and that even today the fundamental principles of both are identical."¹⁰

Gandhi was not always a very good scholar, and his passionate belief in the basic unity of all religions made him distort what we know to be the Buddha's intentions. There is no question that Siddhartha Gautama envisioned a clean break with the Hindu tradition. The Buddha preserved the time-honored techniques of yogic meditation, but his Middle Way contained a strong critique of India's ascetic traditions. He also broke with orthodox Hindus on other major issues, such as the nature of reality and the self and its relationship to the gods. In addition, the Buddha totally rejected the caste system, which Gandhi wanted to

preserve in a revised form. My view is that Gandhi should have broken with his Hindu tradition on all of these points except for his views on the deity. Most importantly, we will find that Gandhi often speaks of both the self and reality in dynamic and relational ways that are Buddhist in their implication.

Gandhi's persistence in believing that the Buddha was a theist is yet another instance in which his own religious views clouded his understanding. Gandhi's argument that "the Law (*dharma*) was God Himself"¹¹ is true only in Mah¹y¹na Buddhism, where the cosmic Buddha is called the *dharmak¹ya*, literally, the Body of the Law. The Buddha himself, however, did not claim any transcendental or cosmic nature, and the deification of the Buddha came after his death. Furthermore, Gandhi's insistence on the Buddha's theism is ironic given the fact that he constantly wavered between personal theism and an impersonal pantheism, or even an impersonal "truthism." After all, Gandhi is most famous for his proposition that "Truth [not a supreme person] is God." In any case, the Buddha adopted the Jain-S¹ ÷ khya-Yoga view of the relationship between humans and gods. This view is neither theistic nor atheistic: the gods do indeed exist, but they, like all other nonhuman beings, have to have human incarnations in order to reach Nirv¹a.

To his credit Gandhi did have the correct view of Nirv¹a, and he is to be commended for his clear understanding of it. He said that "Nirv¹a is utter extinction of all that is base in us, all that is vicious in us, all that is corrupt and corruptible in us. Nirv¹a is not like the black, dead peace of the grave, but the living peace, the living happiness of [the] soul. . . ."¹² This is a perfect response to perennial charges of Buddhist nihilism.

Nirv¹a is, in a word, freedom--freedom not only from hate and greed, but freedom from craving, the unquenchable desire for those things that we can never attain. One significant assumption of the Buddha's position is that ordinary desires, even for the Enlightened One, are acceptable. This is the clearest mode of understanding the Buddha's Middle Way between extreme asceticism on the one hand and sensualism on the other. It is also a good way to see Buddhism as a religious humanism accessible to all people.

A Hungarian convert to Buddhism once asked Gandhi whether God could change because of human prayer. Sensing that his questioner was not sympathetic to the idea of petitionary prayer, Gandhi answered that God was of course immutable, so "I beg it of myself, of my Higher Self, the Real Self with which I have not yet achieved complete identification."¹³ This answer may well have satisfied the Buddhist interlocutor if he were a Mah¹y¹nist, but not so if she were Theravadin. The latter has a belief closer to the Buddha's own: that there is no Higher Self at all. It is clear that Gandhi is much more in line with the Mah¹y¹nists with regard to his concept of self. (There is good reason to believe that the Mah¹y¹nist Higher Self is a philosophical import from Hinduism, although Mah¹y¹nist doctrines of *ñönyat*¹ and total interrelatedness mean that this self is very different from the Hindu *1tman*.) This issue aside, it was never reported that the Buddha petitioned either a god (except in legends) or a Higher Self for any favor. So I am afraid that Gandhi was wrong when he insisted that the Buddha "found illumination through prayer and could not [have] possibly live[d] without it."¹⁴

Gandhi and Buddhists definitely find common ground if Gandhi really means that

prayer is chanting or meditation, which is, in fact, what he suggests in his conversation with the Hungarian. "You may, therefore, describe it as a continual longing to lose oneself in the Divinity which comprises all."¹⁵ In this regard it is instructive to note Gandhi's observation that a Japanese monk chanting at his Sevagram ashram was engaged in Buddhist prayer.¹⁶ Mahadev Dasei, Gandhi's faithful secretary, gives us more information about this person, who was obviously a follower of Nichiren Daishonin:

There is among us a Japanese monk who works like a horse and lives like a hermit, doing all the hard chores of the ashram and going about merrily beating his drum early every morning and evening, filling the air with his chanting of *Om Namyo Hom Renge Kyom*. . . . I do not believe there is one iota of truth in the charge some people have levelled at him of being a . . . spy. If he is a spy, spies must be the most amiable specimens of humanity and I should like to be one. To my mind he lives up to the gospel of *ahi ÷ s'* better than any one of us not excluding Gandhiji.¹⁷

Unfortunately, the Japanese monk's practice of *ahi ÷ s'* did not stop the Indian police from arresting him and removing him from the ashram.

GANDHI, SELF-SUFFERING, AND THE BUDDHA

A typical Gandhian response to the misdeeds of others was to shame them completely by doing their penance for them. This proved to be very effective not only against the British but with his own family and followers as well. It is most intriguing to see how

Gandhi has imposed his own principle of self-suffering on the life of the Buddha. Although not used by the Buddha or his immediate disciples, civil protest through acts of self-immolation has been common in ancient as well as modern Asia. (Buddhist monks burning themselves to death during the Vietnam War are the most recent examples.) Gandhi was of course aware of this tradition of self-immolation,¹⁸ but he still believed that his own particular adaptation of yogic *tapas* was new with him and that his practice of it had not yet been perfected.¹⁹ Presumably he would have seen protests through self-immolation as still too passive as compared to the engaged and dynamic nature of his own *satyagrahas*. (The Vietnamese monks, as far as I can remember, were not actively engaged in dialogue with the American officials.) Some commentators contend that there are instructive parallels between Gandhi's self-suffering and the suffering of the Bodhisattva, and we shall assess this claim in the next section.

If Gandhi does conceive of self-suffering as doing penance for others, then he has gone far beyond the traditional view of *tapas*. Indeed, it may even be at odds with the law of karma, which holds that karma is always individual not collective. (This means that only the individual person can work off her karmic debt.) Gandhi once observed that the "impurity of my associates is but the manifestation of the hidden wrong in me,"²⁰ so this does appear to focus on individual karma, but his position is still equivocal and problematic. Margaret Chatterjee finds Gandhi's position very implausible, for, in the two cases she mentions, it is very difficult to see any "strict causal line[s]" between the actions of others and any implication of guilt on Gandhi's part.²¹

By seeing *tapasya*¹ as a process of self-purification rather than doing penance for other people, one can make better sense of Gandhi's actions. In this light Gandhi would have said that he could not demand perfection in others as long as he found imperfection in himself. During his fast against the violence at Chauri Chaura in 1922, Gandhi announced that "I must undergo personal cleansing. I must become a fitter instrument able to register the slightest variation in the moral atmosphere about me."²² This interpretation is most consistent with his expanded concept of *brahmacharya* as self-control in all actions and his commitment to spiritual purity for himself and his followers.

The concept of collective karma might be made intelligible on the basis of an organic analogy, one that Gandhi uses on several occasions. One might conceive of both and universe as one living organism in which the parts are individual cells. The health of the organism depends on the harmonious interaction of the cells. One diseased cell will affect the whole being for the worse, just as the purification of one might start the healing of the body organism. This organic view of the cosmos is integral to contemporary "process" theology, which has been aptly described in the following terms:

Our cells are . . . localized units of feeling with some measure of autonomy. We cannot willfully control their actions in most cases, and they cannot willfully control our actions. But the whole and the parts do interact and influence one another. As the localized cells of my body are injured and suffer, I suffer, and I [also] enjoy their well-being. . . . We are all members of the body of God, autonomous parts of that divine whole in whom we live and

move and have our being.²³

Gandhi would have embraced this view enthusiastically, because of his total rejection of the social atomism of classical liberalism, in which individual selves, just like physical atoms, are self-contained and self-sufficient autonomous agents. Like the physical atom the social atom "bounces around in the empty space" of society, now just an abstract entity viewed as the simple sum of its individual parts. Whereas the lines of personal responsibility are very clean in social atomism, they are considerably more diffuse in the organic view. The organic view allows us to see that we do indeed have collective obligations and duties in addition to the individual ones of classical liberalism. This view could very well justify Gandhi's insistence on doing penance for another's wrong doing.

GANDHI AND THE BODHISATTVA IDEAL

A critic might say that the most significant difference between the Buddha and Gandhi was that the Buddha was a world-denying ascetic and that Gandhi was not. The following passage sums up this view very nicely:

Outwardly it would be hard to conceive of two individuals more different. On the one hand is the tranquil Buddha who walks serenely and calmly across the pages of history, or traditionally sits peacefully on a louts with a gentle smile of infinitive compassion. . . . On the other hand is the Mah¹tma, speed and energy in every movement, laughing and sorrowing in his ceaseless endeavour to help mankind with the problems of human life. . . .²⁴

Gandhi must have heard similar comments, because he formulated this own firm response: "The Buddha fearlessly carried the war into the adversary's camp and brought down on its knees an arrogant priesthood. [He was] for intensely direct action."²⁵ Who is correct? The truth lies somewhere in between. Although he did frequently confront brahmin priests (the scriptures report that they were almost always converted), it can hardly be said that the Buddha destroyed the Vedic priesthood. (It of course continues to have great power even today.) Furthermore, although Buddhism and Jainism can take much credit for the reduction of animal sacrifice, it still continues today as an integral part of goddess worship in Northeast India and Nepal. And even Gandhi admits that because of India's own weaknesses, the Buddha's, as well as the Jains', message of universal tolerance and nonviolence failed miserably.²⁶ Finally, Gandhi is making the Buddha more of a political activist than he ever was. Gandhi should take sole credit for his own brilliant synthesis of religion and political action.

A growing scholarly consensus now recognizes that the Buddha was less ascetic and less world-denying than his disciples and the early schools that followed him.²⁷ For example, as opposed to most Indian philosophy, the Buddha recognized the body as a necessary constituent of human identity, rather than something to be negated in the spiritual life.²⁸ (Gandhi appears to join other traditions--Cartesian and as well as Jain and Vedantist--which maintain that the body has nothing to do with true personal identity.) It was his disciples who kept asking for more behavioral restrictions, and this difference is summed aptly in the Buddha's observation that sometimes he ate a full bowl of food while his monks only ate

only a half bowl.²⁹ Despite Buddhism's somatic selfhood and a later doctrine of universal Buddha-essence, its strong ascetic traditions did not allow Buddhist practice to be as body or world affirming as it could have been. The influence of Chinese naturalism (especially on Zen Buddhism) and the Buddhist-Christian dialogue have turned contemporary Buddhism much more in this direction.

The spiritual transformation of the entire world is the goal of most schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism. As opposed to the ascetic ideal of early Buddhism, where the emphasis was on personal liberation, the focus in Mahāyāna schools is on universal salvation. The vow of the Bodhisattva should be well known to those who know Buddhism: the Bodhisattva, even though she is free of karmic debt, vows not to enter Nirvāṇa until all sentient beings enter before her. (The Bodhisattva's extra sacrifice caused some perceptive Buddhists to ask whether that made Bodhisattvas superior to the Buddha himself, who of course did not wait for the others.) The Bodhisattva ideal and the comprehensive range of universal salvation makes it relevant to contemporary debates about animal rights and the protection of the environment.

Gandhi constantly emphasized that his focus was universal this-worldly salvation and not individual spiritual liberation: "I have no use for them [love and nonviolence] as a means of individual liberation."³⁰ As with Latin American liberation theology, Gandhi's soteriology maintained that God assumes a preferred option for the poor and the oppressed; indeed, Gandhi sometimes speaks of God existing in suffering humanity and not in Heaven: "God is found more often in the lowliest of His creatures than in the high and mighty."³¹

Does this, then, make Gandhi "the Bodhisattva of the twentieth century," as Ramjee Singh has so boldly suggested?³² The answer must be negative if we insist on early formulations of the Bodhisattva concept. Using the innovative idea of Nichiren Buddhism that all of us become Bodhisattvas by virtue of our service to humanity, then Singh's claim is closer to the mark.

On the face of it Gandhi's self-suffering does appear to be similar to ~¹ntideva's view of the Passion of the Bodhisattva:

By my own self all the mass of others' pain has been assumed: . . . I have the courage in all misfortunes belonging to all worlds to experience every abode of pain I resolve to abide in each single state of misfortune through numberless future ages. . . . for the salvation of all creatures. . . . I for the good of all creatures would experience all the mass of pain and unhappiness in. . . my own body. . . .³³

Gandhi does claim to have suffered--his fasts were long and many--for the good of all (*sarvodaya*); and he did declare that in his next life he wanted to be reborn an untouchable;³⁴ but this still does not constitute anything like the soteriology that we find in Buddhism and Christianity. Gandhi obviously did not claim to have taken away the sins of the world as Buddhist and Christians claim their saviors do.

Following his idea of penance as self-purification, Gandhi may be more like the Bodhisattva, who, although sinless, nonetheless "think[s] of [him]self as a sinner [and] of others as oceans of virtue"?³⁵ But just as we cannot believe Gandhi guilty of the crises for

which he fasted, we certainly cannot believe, nor of course could he, that he was sinless. Not even his most ardent followers have claimed that Gandhi had the redemptive powers of a savior. Revealing his strong Vaishnava background, Gandhi once declared that he wanted to tear open his heart for the poor just as the monkey god Hanuman did to show his devotion to R¹ma, but he said that he did not have the power to perfect such absolute loyalty.³⁶ Finally, it must be observed that Gandhi practiced self-suffering in order to change other people's behavior, whereas the Passion of Christ and the Bodhisattva is conceived of as totally unconditional, expecting nothing in return for their grace and compassion. Gandhi realized the danger in making his self-suffering conditional on the actions of others: it might very well violate the principle that he had learned so well from the *Bhagavadgītā*, viz., we must not act with regard to the fruit of our actions.³⁷

We must again place all aspects of Gandhian religion in its proper political context. (The more appropriate comparison would be Gandhi and Emperor Aśoka, who through political means attempted to establish a nonviolent society in 3rd Century BCE India.) Gandhi called his fasting a "fiery weapon" and that we must fight the "fire" of violence with the "fire" of our own self-sacrifice.³⁸ Others have described Gandhi's self-suffering as a form of moral and political *ju-jitsu* or a "psychological depth charge."³⁹ "It was," as Madan Gandhi says, "a potent weapon to convert the evil doer, i.e., to make him conscious of the spiritual kinship with the victim."⁴⁰ It was, as I said above, an effective means to shame Gandhi's opponents into mending their ways. Joan Bondurant describes it as the "willingness to suffer in oneself to win the respect of an opponent."⁴¹ On Gandhi's side it had

the effect of establishing his absolute seriousness, sincerity, and fearlessness. For those close to him--especially his wife and his sons--it was a test of love--"tough love" as it is now called. "The only way love punishes," as Gandhi once said, "is by [self]-suffering."⁴² (The coercive effect of Gandhi's fasts has been widely discussed and accepted by many scholars.)⁴³ We are now quite far away from the Suffering Servants of Christianity and Mah¹y¹na Buddhism.

GANDHIAN AND BUDDHIST EXPERIMENTS IN TRUTH

The Buddha's famous statement "a person who sees causation, sees the Dharma"⁴⁴ implies that people know how to act, not because of abstract rules or absolutes, but because of their past and immediate circumstances. Those who are mindful of who they are and how they relate to themselves and others will know what to do. The "mirror of Dharma" should not be seen as a common one that we all look into together, as some Mah¹y¹n¹ schools believe, but it is actually a myriad of mirrors reflecting individual histories. Maintaining the essential link between fact and value, just as Greek virtue ethics did, the Buddha holds that the truth about our causal relations dictates the good that we ought to do. As David J. Kalupahana states: "Thus, for the Buddha, truth values are not distinguishable from moral values or ethical values; both are values that participate in nature."⁴⁵ I believe that we can find this same ethical naturalism in Gandhi's experiments in truth, which, because their purpose was always directed to how we should live, were essentially experiments in Dharma.

The Buddha's Middle Way is a distinctively personal mean between extremes, much like Aristotle's relative mean. Aristotle defined a moral virtue as "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by [practical reason]. . . ."46 For example, Aristotle thought it was always wrong to eat too much, but each person will find his/her own relative mean between eating too much and eating too little. A virtue ethics of moderation is still normative, because the principal determinants in finding a workable mean for eating are objective not subjective. If people ignore these objective factors--e.g., body size, metabolism, and other physiological factors--then their bodies, sooner or later, will tell them that they are out of their respective means.

If this analysis is correct, then the traditional translation of the moral imperatives of the Buddha's eight-fold path may be misleading. Translating the Sanskrit stem *samyag-* that appears in each of the words as the "right" thing to do makes them sound like eight commands of duty ethics. Instead of eight universal rules for living, they should be seen as virtues, i.e., dispositions to act in certain ways under certain conditions and personal circumstances. (*Samyagajiva*, right livelihood, is particularly unintelligible on the absolutist reading.) The translation of *samyag-* more appropriate to Buddhist pragmatism would be "suitable" or "fitting," but "right" could remain as long as we understand it to be "right for you." It is only fitting, for example, that a warrior eat more and more often than a monk, or it is only appropriate that the warrior express courage in a different way than the nonwarrior does. Both are equally virtuous, because they have personally chosen the virtues as means, means *relative* to them.

Gandhi's controversial experiments with *brahmacharya* is an instructive example of how Gandhi put aside traditional rules and found his own way, dictated solely by his own ideas, his own dispositions, and his very unique way of purifying himself of sexual desire. He made it perfectly clear to his followers that no one should imitate the quasi-Tantric methods he used. He found his own personal mean between the excess of sexual indulgence and the deficient of complete withdrawal from women. (He thought yogis who did so were cowards.) Sleeping with his grandniece was right for him, and Manu Gandhi claimed that it was as innocent as sleeping with her mother, whom Gandhi had replaced. Gandhi found his own truth in direct experience; there is no evidence that he appealed to any transcendent principle or rule. In fact, he affirmed quite the opposite: "There are some things which are known only to oneself and one's Maker. These are clearly incommunicable. The experiments I am about to relate are not such."⁴⁸ He goes on to stress the scientific nature of these experiments and how their results open for all to verify. Gandhi's sleeping area was open for anyone to see, and those who did found Manu and him sleeping peacefully and innocently.

GANDHI AND THE BUDDHA: THE AESTHETICS OF VIRTUE

Most Euro-American philosophy has unfortunately severed the time-honored connections between truth, goodness, and beauty. Agreeing with his Greek contemporaries, the Buddha established an essential link between goodness and truth on the one hand and evil and untruth on the other.⁴⁹ Of all the contemporary forms of Mah¹y¹na Buddhism it

is the Soka Gakkai that is most aware of the aesthetic dimension of being moral. Even though its founder Tsunesaburo Makiguchi substituted benefit for truth in his trinity of benefit, goodness, and beauty, he still agreed with the Greeks that beautiful deeds are performed by beautiful souls.⁵⁰

Gandhi makes the same connections between truth and goodness and untruth and evil. The identity of reality and truth is also clear in his adoption of the intimately related ideas of *sat* and *satya*. Gandhi is following Hindu philosophy very closely in his identification of God, Truth, and Goodness. Realizing the aesthetic dimension, Gandhi states that "all truths, not merely true ideas, but truthful faces, truthful pictures or songs are highly beautiful. People generally fail to see beauty in truth. . . ." ⁵¹ He also observes that although they say that Socrates was not a handsome man, "to my mind he was beautiful because all his life was a striving after Truth. . . ." ⁵² Some would say that Gandhi was not a handsome man either, but one commentator observed that "there was a rare spiritual beauty that shone in his face." ⁵³

Interestingly enough, Gandhi seems to agree with Makiguchi on the value of benefit and utility: "Whatever is useful to starving millions is beautiful in my mind." ⁵⁴ Although rejecting the philosophy of utilitarianism, Gandhi does acknowledge the ultimate value of the well-being of all people, a value he called *sarvodaya*. This is not a hedonic calculation but a moral and spiritual calculation based on the needs of the lowest strata of society. One might call this a "spiritual consequentialism," and Gandhi's ethical calculus is seen most clearly in his defense of mercy killing: "After calm and clear judgment to kill or cause pain

to a living being with a view to its spiritual or physical benefit from a pure, selfless intent may be the purest form of *ahiṃsā*.⁵⁵ One of the most striking examples of spiritual consequentialism in one school of Mahāyāna Buddhism is the provision that Bodhisattvas may kill persons who will, if not stopped, murder others in the future.⁵⁶ At least two good consequences result from such action: Bodhisattvas accrue merit that they then can bequeath to others, and the would-be murderers are saved from the horrors of Hell. Many Hindus and Jains would object strongly to the pragmatism and contextualism of both Gandhian and Buddhist ethics, but it is precisely these aspects that make both of them relevant for contemporary ethical discussions.

Returning to the relationship of morality and aesthetics and drawing on the tradition of Greek virtue ethics, one could define ethics as the art of making the soul great and noble. (Here the meaning of art would be the idea of creating a unique individual piece rather than making copies from a mould as in craft art.) It was Confucius who conceived of moral development as similar to the manufacture of a precious stone.⁵⁷ At birth we are like uncut gems, and we have an obligation to carve and polish our potential in the most unique and beautiful ways possible. Gandhi appears to agree with this view: "Purity of life is the highest and truest art";⁵⁸ and "Life must immensely excel all the parts put together. To me the greatest artist is surely he who lives the finest life."⁵⁹

If we are to speak of a Gandhian or a Buddhist virtue ethics, at least two major differences must be noted vis-à-vis the Greek tradition. First, for both Gandhi and the Buddha pride is a vice, so the humble soul is to be preferred over Aristotle's "great soul"

(*megalopsychia*). (Aristotle's *megalopsychia* may even be too close to megalomania for the comfort of most contemporary persons.) Second, neither Gandhi nor the Buddha would have accepted Aristotle's elitism. For Aristotle only a certain class of people (free-born Greek males, to be exact) could establish the virtues and attain the good life. In stark contrast, the Dharmak¹ya and Gandhi's village republic contain all people, including the poor, the outcast, people of color, and women.

In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi says that "the Gujarati equivalent for civilization means 'good conduct,'"⁶⁰ so one could say that his ethical program is to replace Vedic and Pur¹aic ritual with the traditional virtues of courage, justice, and compassion. Gandhi does speak of nonviolence as a virtue, and both the Buddha and Gandhi, as I have argued elsewhere,⁶¹ conceive of non-violence as an enabling virtue to the higher virtues of love and compassion.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY: GANDHIAN AND BUDDHIST HUMANISM

It is common to interpret Gandhi in terms of Ved¹ntist philosophy, especially Advaita Ved¹nta, the most dominant school. Gandhi's several references to a qualityless absolute and two equivocal affirmations of the principle of *advaita* offer some support for this view.⁶² The Advaitin interpretation offers a solution to the basic puzzle about Gandhi's self-suffering, which I have mentioned above. The principle of nondualism allows Gandhi to see the sin of the other as his own sin, because in reality there is no distinction between him and others, between the "I" and the "Thou."

The best evidence for the Advaitin solution is the following passage:

I believe in [the] absolute oneness of God and therefore also of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source. I cannot detach myself from the wickedest soul (nor may I be denied identity with the most virtuous). . . . I must involve in my experience the whole of my kind.⁶³

I maintain that we must qualify the implications of this passage both in terms of its moral implications and in terms of a coherent interpretation of Gandhi's philosophy. The Advaitin solution completely undermines the basic moral implications of the law of karma. Instead of the Advaitin model of total undifferentiated unity, I suggest that this passage be interpreted in terms of the organic analogy mentioned above. Organic holism has the distinct advantage over absolute monism in that it maintains the reality of the individual (on the analogue of the integral living cell) while at the same time making collective responsibility intelligible as well. In a previous article I have reformulated Gandhi's refraction analogy so that it gives the equal weight to the unity and individuality that we find in Gandhi's writings.⁶⁴

The problems of consistently maintaining an Advaitin Gandhi manifest themselves most clearly in Bhikhu Parekh's otherwise excellent book on Gandhi's political philosophy.⁶⁵ After summarizing basic Indian philosophy he claims that Gandhi, just like Ājīkara, envisioned a two-tiered religion of a personal theism focusing on Īva, Vi-āu, Dev» and an impersonal monism of ūtman-Brahman. People in the second tier would recognize the illusion of individual self and consciousness, would eventually put the phenomenal world

behind them, and would move from the worship of individual deities to experience the total unity of *ġtman-Brahman*. Gandhi must object already at this point, because he wavered between personal theism and impersonal monism and never claimed that one was superior to the other.

More problems arise with Parekh's interpretation, especially with regard to Gandhi's political activism and the dynamic and engaged individualism that such a view requires. There is indeed a tension in Gandhi between the ascetic and mystic Gandhi, who, as Parekh shows, has difficulty justifying, from an Advaitin standpoint, the feeling of, let alone need for love; and the activist Gandhi, who is committed to moral autonomy, love, compassion, and justice. But nowhere in Gandhi's voluminous works does he indicate that the individual self is an illusion. (Chatterjee puts the point bluntly: "Gandhi had no truck with the *m'y* doctrine.")⁶⁶ Gandhi's thoughts range from the self's complete autonomy, where he has come under the powerful influences he admits the Euro-American tradition had on him, to a relational, social self that has an organic relation with society and the cosmos as a whole. Parekh cannot support both an Advaitin Gandhi and the Gandhi who exhorts individuals to conform to their own historical-cultural truths.⁶⁷ For the Advaitin there can be no ultimate value in such truths.

There is sufficient evidence to call Gandhi a pantheist, but many commentators are not careful enough to distinguish between pantheism, where the cosmos and its parts are both real and divine, and the Advaitin position where only *ġtman-Brahman* is real. John White has suggested,⁶⁸ echoing medieval Jain arguments, that there is a basic inconsistency

in Advaita Vedānta, because from the standpoint of the unliberated souls both Ātman-Brahman and the phenomenal world exists, albeit the latter only in a derivative and temporal mode, whereas from that standpoint of the liberated souls the world does not exist. The Advaitin is not even consistently nondualistic, because, until all humans are liberated, the Advaitin position is, as White calls it, a "transcendental dualism," a dualism of divine reality and derivative phenomena roughly equivalent to Christian theology. The principal difference is that God creates the world in Christianity whereas it is the creation of ignorance in Advaita Vedānta.

In addition to his affirmation of the individual, Gandhi also explicitly connects "the capacity of nonviolence" with a rejection of "the theory of the permanent inelasticity of human nature."⁶⁹ If this statement is interpreted metaphysically, Gandhi seems to have joined the Buddha in his critique of the *ātman* of the Upaniṣads and all other Indian views of an eternal, immutable self. Although Mahāyāna Buddhists reinstate an eternal soul, in most schools this self, like early Buddhist views, still enters into relations and is responsive to change. Mahāyāna Buddhists tend to be more supportive of real diversity within unity, and especially helpful is the Mahāyānists' suggestion that nonduality be expressed as "two but not two" so as to avoid the implication of the total nondifferentiation that we find in Advaita Vedānta.⁷⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh has his own playful way of phrasing this profound point: "Non-duality means 'not two,' but 'not two' also means 'not one.' That is why we say 'non-dual' instead of 'one.'"⁷¹ Zen Buddhists as well as many other Mahāyānists also reject the mind-body dualism that even infects some of Gandhi's writings. These observations

allow us to see the possibility of both a Buddhist naturalism as well as a Buddhist humanism, i.e., a view that affirms both the reality of nature and individual personal identity.⁷²

Daisaku Ikeda, the philosophical leader of the Soka Gakkei, paraphrases the medieval monk Nichiren Daishonin as saying: "The Buddha is an ordinary human being; ordinary human beings are the Buddha."⁷³ There are two interpretations of the second phrase depending upon whether one follows early Buddhist texts or embraces later Mah'y'nist views. From the standpoint of early Buddhism to say that we are all Buddhas simply means that all of us have the potential to understand the Four Noble Truths and to overcome craving in our lives. The Mah'y'nist interpretation would be that we all possess a Buddha-nature metaphysically equivalent to the Dharmak'ya, the cosmic "body" of the Buddha. Given his commitment to a general Ved'ntist concept of soul, Gandhi would have felt very comfortable with the Mah'y'nist position, particularly since it respects diversity within unity and supports a dynamic and engaged concept of self. I therefore conclude that Buddhist humanism--a humanism of nonviolence and compassion--may be the very best way to take Gandhi's philosophy into the 21st Century.

ENDNOTES

1. M. K. Gandhi, *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, trans. Madadev Dasei (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1927), chap. 20.
2. Quoted in Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral the Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 226. In 1929 Gandhi told an audience in Mandalay that they should use Buddhism to "explore the limitless possibilities of nonviolence" (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* [New Delhi: Government of India Publications Division, 1959], vol. 40, p. 159).

3. Gandhi, Speech at a Public Meeting in Rangoon (March 8, 1929); *The Collected Works*, vol. 40, p. 104. The comment about his son is in a speech that he gave in Sri Lanka. See *Young India* 9 (November 24, 1927), p. 392.

4. 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.

5. Iyer, op. cit., p. 49. Margaret Chatterjee claims that one of Gandhi's prayers has Buddhist overtones: "The goal of the devotee is seen as the relief of suffering humanity, not as personal release from bondage. The mood expressed is much closer to the Bodhisattva than to the arhat ideal" (*Gandhi's Religious Thought* [Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1983], p. 27).

6. Chatterjee, op. cit., pp. 43, 105.

7. See my "Gandhi, *Ahiṅsā*, and the Self," *Gandhi Marg* 15:1 (April-June, 1993), pp. 24-38; "The Virtue of Non-Violence: A Buddhist Perspective," *Seikyo Times* (February, 1994), pp. 28-36; and "*Ahiṅsā*, the Self, and Postmodernism," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 35:1 (March, 1995), pp. 71-86.

8. Gandhi, Speech at a Public Meeting in Toungo (Sri Lanka); *Collected Works*, vol. 40, p. 161.

9. Gandhi, *Young India* 9 (November 24, 1927), p. 392.

10. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1987), p. 34.
11. Gandhi, *Young India* 9 (November 24, 1927), p. 392.
12. Ibid., p. 393.
13. Gandhi, *Harijan* 7 (August 19, 1939), p. 237. I have supplied a capital "S" on each of the original "selves."
14. Gandhi, *The Essence of Hinduism* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1987), p. 176.
15. Gandhi, *Harijan* 7 (August 19, 1939), p. 237; *Harijan* 12 (February 15, 1948), p. 34.
16. Gandhi, *Harijan* 11 (August 17, 1947), p. 281.
17. Madadev Desai, "At Sevagram" in D. G. Tendulkar, et al., eds. *Gandhiji: His Life and Work* (Bombay: Karnatak, 1944), pp. 204-5. Contemporary followers of Nichiren use the mantra *Nam myoho renge kyo*, instead of what stands in this text.
18. See *Harijan* 8 (September 8, 1940), p. 277, where there is a long discussion of *tapasya*¹.
19. See Chatterjee, op. cit., p. 83.
20. Gandhi, *The Bombay Chronicle* (April 8, 1929); quoted in Chouduri, op. cit., p. 23.
21. Chatterjee, op. cit., p. 25.
22. Gandhi, *Young India* 4 (February 16, 1922), p. 103. Also see S. K. Saxena, "The Fabric of Self-Suffering: A Study in Gandhi" in *Suffering: Indian Perspectives*, ed. Kapil N. Tiwari, ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1986), p. 232.
23. Rem B. Edwards, *Reason and Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972), p. 211.

24. Quoted in K. P. Karunakaran, *Gandhi--Interpretations* (New Delhi: Gitanjali Publishing House, 1985), p. 17.
25. Quoted in Dorothy Hogg, *The Moral Challenge of Gandhi* (Allahabad: Kitah Mahal, 1946), p. 19. Also quoted in Madan G. Gandhi, "[The] Metaphysical Basis of Gandhian Thought," p. 210.
26. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 14, p. 475. Gandhi specifically criticizes Ājīkara for using "unspeakable cruelty in banishing Buddhism out of India" (ibid.).
27. The leading scholar here is David J. Kalupahana. See his *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976); and *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992).
28. See Peter Harvey, "The Mind-Body Relationship in Pali Buddhism: A Philosophical Investigation," *Asian Philosophy* 3:1 (1993). Daisaku Ikeda, a contemporary follower of Nichiren Daishonin, has one of the most positive views of the body in Mahāyāna Buddhism. See his *Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth and Death: Buddhism in the Contemporary World* (London: MacDonald, 1988), pp. 141-42.
29. The *Majjhima-Nikāya* II, 6; *The Middle Length Sayings*, trans. I. B. Horner (London: Luzac & Co., 1970), vol. 2, p. 207.
30. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, June 30, 1944.
31. Quoted in Nair Pyarelal, *Mahātma Gandhi, The Last Phase* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1958), vol. 2, p. 143. See also Gandhi, *Young India* 9 (November 24, 1927), pp. 90, 93; *Harijan* 4 (August 29, 1936), p. 226.

32. Ramjee Singh, "Gandhi and the Bodhisattva Ideal" in *New Dimensions and Perspectives in Gandhism*, p. 471.
33. Āntideva, *Āikā Samuccaya*, trans. Cecil Bendall and W. H. D. Rouse (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), pp. 256-257.
34. Gandhi, *Young India* 3 (May 4, 1921), p. 144 .
35. Āntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, excerpted in *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, ed. E. A. Burt (New York: Mentor Books, 1966), p. 140.
36. Gandhi, *Young India* 9 (March 24, 1927), p. 93.
37. See Gandhi, *Harijan* 8 (October 13, 1940), p. 322.
38. Ibid.; *Harijan* 8 (September 8, 1940), p. 277.
39. Chouduri, op. cit., p. 87.
40. Madan Gandhi, op. cit., p. 211.
41. Joan Bondurant, *The Conquest of Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, new rev. ed., 1988), p. 114.
42. Gandhi, *Young India* 4 (February 16, 1922), p. 103.
43. E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1948), p. 143.
44. *Majjhima-nikāya* I.190-1, quoted in David J. Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*, p. 64.
45. Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy . . .* , p. 63.
46. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b36 (W. D. Ross, trans.).
48. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. M. Desai (Ahmedabad:

Navajivan, 2nd ed., 1959), p. xiv.

49. See Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 63.

50. Dayle M. Bethel, ed., *Education for Creative Living: Ideas and Proposals of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi*, trans. Alfred Birnbaum (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989), pp. 75, 82.

51. Gandhi, *Young India* 6 (November 13, 1924), p. 377.

52. Ibid.

53. M. Kirti Singh, *[The] Philosophical Import of Gandhism* (Delhi: South Asia Publications, 1994), p. 136n3.

54. Gandhi, *Young India* 6 (November 20, 1924), p. 386.

55. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 37, p. 313.

56. See Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 145.

57. See my article "The Dancing Ru: A Confucian Aesthetics of Virtue," *Philosophy East and West* 51:3 (July, 2001).

58. Gandhi, *Harijan* 8 (February 19, 1938), p.10.

59. Quoted in M. Kirti Singh, op. cit., p. 135.

60. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 4th ed., 1921), chap. 13.

61. See my "The Virtue of Non-Violence: A Buddhist Perspective," *Seikyo Times* (February, 1994), passim.

62. "God, ourselves and all objects in the universe are in essence one reality. Even God vanishes and we have only *neti, neti*" (*Collected Works*, vol. 32, p. 218). By also affirming *dvaita* (i.e., dualism), Gandhi is being more than equivocal. See his speech at

Tanjore on September 16, 1927 in *Collected Works*, vol. 35, p. 1. Also feeling "one with God" is "the principle of *advaita*" is not its technical meaning in *āj kara*. See letter to Chi. Maganlal (May 18, 1918) in Iyer, *The Moral and Political Writings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), vol. 2, p. 290. Gandhi's statement that "the sum total of life is God" (*Harijan* 12 [February 15, 1948], p. 33) is definitely not the Advaitin position.

63. Gandhi, *Young India* 6 (September 25, 1924), p. 313; cf. his comments on the unity of life in *Young India* 4 (February 16, 1922), p. 104. S. K. Saxena's insightful discussion (op. cit.) of Gandhi's self-suffering also assumes the Advaitin position.

64. See my "Gandhi, *Ahiṣṣā*, and the Self," p. 30-31. For a fuller discussion see my *Spiritual Titanism: Indian, Chinese, and Western Perspectives* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), pp. 51-52.

65. Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 92-100.

66. Chatterjee, op. cit., p. 134. In Gandhi "we are not called to a higher state of consciousness where the mesh of *māyā* will disappear" (p. 104).

67. Parekh, op. cit., p. 94.

68. John D. White, "God and the World from the Viewpoint of Advaita Vedānta: A Critical Assessment," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 30:2 (June, 1981), pp. 185-193.

69. Gandhi, *Harijan* 9 (June 7, 1942), p. 177. Gandhi is not consistent on this idea of a mutable self, as he refers to an immutable self and an immutable God several times (*Harijan* 7 [August 19, 1939], p. 237; excerpted in *Truth is God*, p. 43). As I have

already noted in note 61, Gandhi's continual references to becoming as well as being show a basic process orientation in his thought.

70. See Daisaku Ikeda, *Buddhism: The First Millenium*, p. 140.

71. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987), p. 39.

72. For more on Buddhism and humanism see my *Spiritual Titanism: Indian, Chinese, and Western Perspectives* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), pp. 158-161.

73. The Soka Gakkai's *World Tribune* (June 6, 1994), p. 3.