Martin T. Adam, University of Victoria

This paper explores the connection between nonviolence, Buddhist emptiness teachings, and religion as such. I have limited my treatment of Buddhist theory to certain core doctrines originally formulated in India and attributed by the tradition to the Buddha. The study proceeds by exploring some non-Buddhist perspectives (Jainism, Gandhi) that I believe help to bring out the relevant features of the Buddha's teachings.

In 1998, while studying at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, India, I had the opportunity to attend a question and answer session on Buddhism, presided over by the Institute's director, the Venerable Samdhong Rinpoche. At one point a young American student asked Rinpoche, "If you had to sum up the essence of the Buddha's teachings in just a few words, what would you say?" The reply was immediate: "Ahi s ." Nonviolence. One word.

I was genuinely surprised at this reply. The student, it seemed to me, was asking for some explanation as to that which is distinctively Buddhist. The doctrine of nonviolence, by contrast, is common to many religious traditions; it is today associated with Mah tma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. every bit as much as with the Buddha. The response didn't add up.

On the other hand, Samdhong Rinpoche was well known as an advocate of nonviolent Gandhian methods of civil disobedience (saty graha), especially in the context of the struggle for Tibet's liberation. This suggested the possibility of a connection which I was missing.

I dcb XYYdYf fYÛYWh]cb =VY[Ub hc gi gdYWh h\Uh h\Y fYk UgUdfcV`Ya with the original question. After all, wasn't Buddhism opposed to the very idea of "essence"? Isn't lack of "essence" or "nature" (ni svabh va)

precisely the point of the Mah y na

stepped upon. It died." For Jains this event is clearly a case of killing, which is to say, hi s . For Buddhists the matter is not so clear-cut. To describe the act as an act of killing would require both the intention to kill as well as the death of the ant. While as a matter of course members of the Buddhist tradition do sometimes loosely employ the language of "harm" solely in reference to the objective effects of actions, technically speaking the predication of hi s or ahi s has traditionally been considered to turn on the subjective component of intention.[3]

Thus in general there is a contrast in the semantics of ahi s in these two faiths and certain English translations of the word seem more appropriate to one than the other. Those that initially point towards the objective component of the effects of one's activities on ch\Yfg gYYa hc a cfY WYUf`mÚh h\Y >U]b dYfgdYWh]j Y flY'[ "bcb!]b^i fmž non-killing). Translations that initially point towards the inner subjective state of mind that serves as the motivating cause of one's actions Úha cfY Wa ZcfhUV`mk]h\ h\Y 6i XX\Uõ hYUW]b[flY'["bcb\Ufa Zi `bYggž nonviolence, love).

This difference is connected to concrete divergences in practice and, as we will see, differences in ontology. In the Buddha's teaching a person may only be faulted for accidentally injuring another sentient being on the grounds that he or she has been inattentive or careless, but she cannot be faulted for being \Ufa Zi `"H\Y ÛUkž]Z h\YfY]g cbYž lies in the lack of awareness characterizing the agent's intentional state (i.e. being inattentive), not in its degree of benevolence. Thus, in general, followers of the Buddha adopt a pragmatic, middle way when it comes to questions of practice and restraint of action. In the Jain tradition, because action per se is so potentially harmful, both to others and to oneself, it is to be avoided as far as this is possible. In the Buddhist tradition too, a certain restraint of action is considered integral to the religious life—both as a means of preventing harm and

to others whenever one can. But balancing such considerations is a realistic recognition that one must engage in wide variety of everyday UWhj]h]Yg]b cfXYf hc fYUW h\Y ÚbU [cU" 6ch\ hfUX]h]cbg U[fYY cb h\Y general principle that one should avoid injury to other creatures to the "greatest degree possible"; but they differ on where to draw the line. In seeking to do the "least possible harm," the two faiths understand "possibility" differently.

Not surprisingly, the differences between the two faiths with respect to *ahi s* extend to their respective metaphysical understandings of the nature of *karma* and its operations within cyclical existence (*sa sar*). The Jain tradition holds to a materialistic conception of *karma* as a kind of sticky matter, the impure particles of which accrue to, or give a "color" to, the pure underlying self (or life-monad, *j va*). *Karma* blocks the natural radiant light of omniscience inherent to the self; it binds that self to future rebirth. Physical, vocal and mental activities all have the effect of attaching *karma* to the self (Dundas 1992: 98). Thus even unintentional actions have a negative karmic impact. By contrast, as we have seen, the Buddhist tradition regards *karma* as the intentional component of bodily, vocal and mental actions. Furthermore, *karma* is conceived of as carrying its own momentum; rather than requiring an unchanging non-physical subject or self in which to inhere, it is part of a changing, impermanent mental continuum. There is no conceptual need to postulate an underlying permanent self.

In spite of such differences, it is important to notice some very general understandings that the two religious perspectives share. Both subscribe to the view that a feeling of sympathy and gentleness toward living beings forms a necessary part of the path that leads to liberation. Both hold that malevolent intentions towards others are harmful to the subject who entertains them and that this is so irrespective of whether such intentions are acted upon. Both agree that it is worse for the agent if these intentions are acted upon. Thus, for both, it is assumed that some actions are "objectively" worse than others.

The reason it is important to articulate such presuppositions is for what they indicate regarding the deeper worldview at work. Clearly the cosmological vision of the Buddha, like that of M hav ra, encompasses a notion of the objective law-governed operations of *karma*. Put another way, we can say that the Buddha subscribed to a commonly held Indian viewpoint that accepted the existence of an

objective moral order or natural law (dharma) at work in the unfolding of worldly events.

Connected with this notion of moral law is the idea of purity of action. Pure actions have positive results in experience. Impure actions, such as those motivated by intent to harm, have negative effects. This can be seen in the very first verses of the Dhammapada, which clearly capture this idea of lawful regularity in the moral sphere, while at the same time bringing out the importance of the mental component of action.

> Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts, suffering follows him like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox. (Dhammapada 1)

> Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts, happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow. (Dhammapada 2)

Thus the Buddha held that purity of mind is conducive to hap-

one's awareness of the way events actually occur. Thus these obscurations are cognitive, while those associated with greed and hatred are emotional in nature. Of the cognitive obscurations the most fundamental is the mistaken view that accepts the existence of an independent permanent self. It is only on the basis of a deeply rooted attachment to this false idea of "self" that the emotional obscurations of greed and hatred can arise. If this basic disorientation is removed, so too are the twin possibilities of self-centered craving and antagonism towards so-called "others."

Actions marked by the three poisons are seen as unskillful in the sense that they lead to future suffering, both for the agent and for others. It is important to recognize, however, that in the Buddhist view such actions are not impure because of their negative results, but rather the reverse (Harvey 2000: 49). They bring negative karmic results on account of a quality that they actually are, namely, the impure, unwholesome mental quality of an intention marked by the presence of one or more of the three poisons. Some actions are wholesome, sharing in the quality of awakening; some are not. Thus in spite of the anti-essentialist dimension of his teachings the Buddha recognized that practically speaking there is an "objective" way that actions may be characterized with respect to the quality of awakening. Actions have "natures" (svabh va), albeit transitory, interdependently existing ones. Among the terms that may be correctly and usefully employed to describe them are "pure" or "impure," "awakened" or "unawakened," as the case may be.[6]

Thus the idea that there exists an objective moral law (dharma) operational in the universe is both clear and commonplace in the discourses of the Buddha. The effort to understand and abide by this law in one's personal moral conduct (la) is considered essential to the attainment of awakening. The path leading to awakening involves training oneself to be nonviolent in thought, word, and deed. The WcbXi Wh cZ U dYfgcb k\c \Ug Wca d`YhYmdi f]ÚYX h\Y a]bXž UbX

6. This "objective" aspect of the Buddha's moral thinking is sometimes misunderstood or glossed over by western interpreters of Buddhism. The idea of the ultimate lack of an independent nature or emptiness is often mistakenly considered to imply the view that there are no correct descriptions of conventional reality. The implication is that moral values are either subjective or culturally relative. But this is a non sequitur. For although it is true that events and actions may be seen, from an awakened perspective, as "empty" of any ultimate independent nature, such emptiness does not preclude their having a XYÚb]hY bUhi fY cb h\Y `Yj Y` cZ]bhYfXYdYbXYbh sa s ric reality.

thereby attained liberation, will thereafter embody this moral law without effort (Harvey 2000: 44). Nonviolence is thus viewed as the natural, spontaneous expression of the highest spiritual realization. The intent to harm, on the other hand, is an expression of hatred,

Yet Gandhi himself usually exercised some caution in this area, identifying the highest principle with “Truth” (satya) rather than Î; cXÏ˙ fl UbX\]˙%ｹ) $.˙&(+Ł"˙: cf˙; UbX\]˙ÎHfi h\Ï˙g][b]ÚYX˙U bYUf˙ universal value. Even atheists, he argued, accept Truth as the goal of their considerations. While Gandhi appears to have accepted the idea that some individuals do not believe in Truth, such individuals he considered lost (1950: 153

And yet Gandhi maintained the distinction:

> Nevertheless ahimsa is the means; Truth is the end. Means, to be means, must always be within our reach, and so ahimsa is our supreme duty. (1950: 251)

This does not mean that a realized person could never knowingly hurt another or destroy a life, but rather that he could never VY a ch]j UhYX VmiUb]bhYbh]cb a Uf_YX Vmi gYÚg\ ]bhYfYgh cf Vm\UhfYX in doing so. Thus, a strict Jain interpretation of ahi s as “not killing in any circumstance” is rejected by Gandhi (1950: 227-232). According to Gandhi violence in the sense of the destruction of life is unavoidable in this world (1950: 232). There are instances in which the best course of action is to kill (e.g., in certain cases of mercy _]``]b[Ł" =h]gž \ck Yj Yfž]a dcgg]V`Y hc XYÚbY h\Y [YbYfU WcbX]h]cbg cZ such unavoidability. There is no formula for calculating these (1950: 207-209). One should attempt to do the “least harm possible,” on a case-by-case basis (1950: 194). In his own written explorations of ahi s Gandhi vacillates on whether to call unavoidable killing hi s . What counts, in the last analysis, is the agent’s subjective state of non-attachment (1950: 231-232). Lack of attachment to the results of one’s actions means lack of self-interested motive in undertaking them. A genuine lack of self-interested motive means acting out of a realization of the highest Truth or Self which is identical in all beings.[7] K]h\ gi W UfYWc[b]h]cbž gYÚg\ ]bhYbh UbX \UhfYX VYWca Y]a dcgg]V`Y" H\i g Zcf ; UbX\]ž Ug Zcf h\Y 6i XX\Už U di fYž bcb!UhhUWVYXž ÎgYÛYgg]
intention is considered the key factor relevant to the predication of nonviolence to any particular action.

These points are worth exploring with some care. In response to Jain criticisms, Gandhi acknowledged the apparent counter-intuitiveness of describing an act of intentional killing as an instance of ahi s

full awakening precludes the possibility of taking life, even with the best, most loving of intentions.

This parallels some of Gandhi's intuitions regarding the nature cZgd]f]hi U`fYU]nUh]cb"`Hc`UWhk]h\``cjY]b`cbYñg`\YUfhžk]h\`UgYÛYgg` concern for the well being of others foremost in one's mind, implies a negation of self-interest and hatred as motives. The closer one approximates a realization of Truth the more effortlessly nonviolence comes to characterize one's actions—the more willing one is to take gi ZZYf]b[`i dcb`cbYgY`ZZcf`h\`YVYbYÚhcZch\`Yfg"`5hdc]bhg;`UbX\]`Yj`Yb` seems to suggest that a genuinely realized yogi could never purposefully kill another being (1950: 194–95). Something in the nature of the sage's realization would seem to preclude this as a live possibility. Perhaps this is because it is unnecessary. According to Gandhi, the love of an awakened being possesses a supernatural force capable of gi VXi]b[`Yj`Yb`ZYfcW]ci g`k]`XVYUghgžUj]Yk`h\UhÚbXg`WYUf`dUfU`Yg]b` the Buddhist scriptures.[10]

Although it is clear that Gandhi did speculate on the nature of Truth and its realization, he also maintained an attitude of humility in acknowledging the limitations of the human intellect. He seems to have regarded the question of Truth as best tackled "directly" in a non-speculative manner. Thus throughout his life he undertook numerous "experiments" in living aimed at a realization of the Truth within his own lived experience. This process of embodying or actualizing the Truth he viewed as nonviolence itself. It is our highest duty (dharma) and distinctive of our very humanity. In terms of interpersonal conduct it can be understood as requiring humility and an honoring of the other. It also entails honesty, including a willingness to acknowledge one's own faults. Such outward honesty presupposes an "inward \cbYgmĬ`cf`gYZUkUfYbYggž`U`Úfa bYgg`]b`XYhYfa]bUh]cb`hc`cVgYfjY` one's mental states without self-deception as to their actual nature.

10. See Gandhi 1950: 232; Ñ amoli 1992: 262-264. At a minimum the exclusion of

This implies a concentrated effort to stick to the Truth (

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