

Nonviolence and Emptiness: Buddha, Gandhi, and the “Essence of Religion”

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Abstract

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.

Buddhism and Nonviolence

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: “*Ahiṃsā*.” 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 Mahātmā 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 (*satyāgraha*), especially in the context of the struggle for Tibet’s liberation. This suggested the possibility of a connection which I was missing.

Upon deeper reflection I began to suspect that there was a problem with the original question. After all, wasn’t Buddhism opposed to the very idea of “essence”? Isn’t lack of “essence” or “nature” (*niḥsvabhāva*)

precisely the point of the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*)? According to this teaching nothing possesses an underlying essence or independent existence. Every so-called individual “thing” (*dharma*) is actually a transitory event, arising and ceasing in mutual interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*) with every other thing/event—including the very minds that create and define them in the first place. The phenomena we call “Buddhism” are no exception. They too are empty. Emptiness is basic and it would seem to preclude the possibility of an essence for Buddhism.

And yet perhaps Rinpoche hadn’t wished to enter into such an esoteric discussion. He may have found it more appropriate to choose a simpler, more immediately comprehensible doctrine. But why *ahimsā*? As a scholar, if I take his response at face value, this question concerning essence becomes “How, precisely, are we to understand the relationship between nonviolence and emptiness?”

Buddhist Morality

As an academic trained in the western philosophical tradition, I have inherited a number of assumptions and attitudinal stances from which my enquiries generally proceed. Not the least of these is the basic Aristotelian understanding that in seeking out the essence of a thing one must be seeking out that which makes it unique, that which separates it, conceptually, from other things. There is a great deal to be said for this assumption, but clearly, in the context of the Buddhist tradition at least, it is questionable. Similarly dubious, as we have noted, is the ontological notion of essence as an “independent reality” or “unchanging substratum.” How then might we begin to make sense of the idea of *ahimsā* as the essence of Buddhism?

The Sanskrit word *ahimsā* has many possible translations. Literally “nonharm,” *ahimsā* was probably first clearly articulated as a religious ideal by Vardhamāna Mahāvīra (599–527 B.C.E.), the great Jain teacher and older contemporary of the historical Buddha. The principal credo of the Jains is well known: “*Ahimsā* is the highest religion (or duty, *dharma*).”¹ A similar preeminence is widely expressed in various Hindu schools as well, for example in the Yoga tradition. Jainism and yoga were both key influences in the formation of Gandhi’s conception

1. “*ahimsā paramo dharmah*”; See Dundas 1992: 160.

of nonviolence. These traditions place *ahiṃsā* first among the list of precepts to be lived by. Certainly, Buddhism is not alone in emphasizing an ideal of gentleness and concern for the welfare of living beings.

Of course, important differences do lie in the details of the respective traditions' conceptions of *ahiṃsā*. Jains, for example, subscribe to a much more comprehensive conception of "living beings" towards which their sense of concern extends—including objects most non-Jains would consider inanimate. They have, as well, set out a much stricter code of conduct in order to minimize the possible harm which one might do inadvertently (e.g. gently sweeping the ground before one in order to avoid stepping on insects). A large part of the psycho-spiritual impetus behind this code lies in the idea that even unintentionally injurious actions have a negative karmic impact on the agent who performs them. They are instances of *hiṃsā* (harm), and, if committed, future suffering for the agent is sure to follow.

For the Buddha, on the other hand, intention (*cetanā*) is the key determinant of the karmic consequentiality of actions performed. Inadvertently injuring a creature is regrettable, but does not carry with it any negative karmic repercussions for that specific effect. Of conduct that results in injury, it is only those actions that are intentionally harmful that bring such consequences. Like Māhāvīra, the historical Buddha subscribed to the view that the morally positive and negative actions (*karma*) that one performs respectively result in happy and painful experiences. But in the Buddha's moral discourse, the concept of action can be distinguished from that of mere behavior; an action is conceived in terms of the mental state motivating its performance, not in terms of its results: "It is intention that I call *karma*; having formed the intention one performs acts by body, speech and mind."² Without a motivating intention a given behavior does not constitute action *per se*. Thus the agent, so-called, does not bear specific moral responsibility for the results of that behavior. Those results are not relevant to whatever karmic fruit may arise from the conduct. From the point of view of intention such behavior cannot be considered either *hiṃsā* or *ahiṃsā*.

Thus, to take an example, the same outward behavior that from a Jain perspective would be described with the sentence: "Ananda killed an ant without meaning to" might be given the following Buddhist analysis: "Ananda was walking. Without meaning to, an ant was

2. *Āṅguttara Nikāya* iii. 415. Quoted in Gethin 1998: 120.

stepped upon. It died.” For Jains this event is clearly a case of killing, which is to say, *hiṃsā*. 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 *hiṃsā* or *ahiṃsā* has traditionally been considered to turn on the subjective component of intention.³

Thus in general there is a contrast in the semantics of *ahiṃsā* 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 others seem to more clearly fit the Jain perspective (e.g. non-injury, non-killing). Translations that initially point towards the inner subjective state of mind that serves as the motivating cause of one’s actions fit more comfortably with the Buddha’s teaching (e.g. nonharmfulness, 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* harmful. The flaw, if there is one, 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 as part of the path of cultivating the awareness that leads to awakening (*bodhi*). One is to remain aware of one’s environment, avoiding injury

3. There is an ambiguity here which we will have occasion to return to below. At this juncture, for purposes of comparison we merely identify the traditions’ predominant manners of discourse concerning violence and nonviolence. In fact, both traditions recognize the possibility of the other perspective. While Buddhists will occasionally speak of harm in “objective” terms, independent of intention, for members of the Jain tradition there is an important sense in which nonviolence refers to the “subjective” state of a *jiva* completely purified through practice.

to others whenever one can. But balancing such considerations is a realistic recognition that one must engage in wide variety of everyday activities in order to reach the final goal. Both traditions agree on the 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 *ahimsā* extend to their respective metaphysical understandings of the nature of *karma* and its operations within cyclical existence (*samsarā*). 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, *jīva*). *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 Māhāvīra, 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 happiness. Impure mental states were considered obstructive to this goal; they lead to suffering (*dukkha*). In Buddhist vocabulary, pure mental states and actions are described as *kuśala*, a word that may be best translated as either “wholesome” or “skillful.”⁴ As for impure states and actions, these are described with the word *akuśala*, “unwholesome” or “unskillful.”

Classically, unskillful actions are formulated in terms of “three roots of the unwholesome” or “three poisons.” The presence of these impurities in one’s mind bars one from the awareness that sees reality as it is (*yathābhūtam*).⁵ The three are greed, hatred, and delusion (*lobha*, *dveṣa*, *moha*). Their wholesome opposites are non-attachment, loving-kindness, and wisdom. These qualities lead to awakening.

Of the three poisons, it is delusion or ignorance (*moha*, *avidyā*) that is generally considered the fundamental human problem. Buddhism, like Jainism, holds to a soteriology of liberating awareness or wisdom (*jñāna*, *prajñā*). When delusion is completely removed, liberation is achieved. Delusion does not merely indicate an absence of knowledge, but rather the presence of mistaken views that function to obscure

4. See Harvey 2000: 42-46.

5. Classically this is described in terms of three marks of existence: suffering, impermanence, and lack of self. See Nyanatiloka 1972: 197.

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" (*svabhāva*), 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 (*sīla*) 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 conduct of a person who has completely purified the mind, and

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 definite nature on the level of interdependent *samsāric* 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, which is based on delusion. Such hatred is simply not possible for a person who realizes the emptiness of self and other, who truly sees the interdependence of beings.

The Buddhist tradition asserts that this highest of realizations is, in the last analysis, ineffable. Words can only point us towards that “emptiness” which must finally be known in experience. Nonviolence, on the other hand, is the concrete and active expression of this highest experiential knowledge. Whereas the realization of a Buddha might only be imagined, his actions can be plainly seen.

The middle way is a way of being and acting in the world, a way that is aimed to liberate sentient beings from the effects of unwholesome action. In this light it does not seem so implausible to suggest the principle of *ahimsā* as the most fitting candidate for the essence of the Buddha’s teachings. It is this moral sensibility that guides Buddhists in everything they do.

Gandhi and Buddhism

Gandhi’s views on *ahimsā* may be of some aid in shedding light on the teachings of the Buddha. Arguably the greatest exponent of non-violence since Māhāvīra and the Buddha, he echoed their sentiments by identifying morality as the essence of religion itself (Gandhi 1982: 14). In the spirit of Buddhist anti-essentialism I now propose to briefly explore this possibility.

Gandhi once addressed an audience of Theravādin monks, chiding them (rather mischievously one suspects) for their view that the Buddha did not believe in God. “[The Buddha] emphasized and redeclared the eternal and unalterable existence of the moral government of the universe. He unhesitatingly said that the Law was God Himself” (Gandhi 1950: 272). Whatever one might make of Gandhi’s historical claims concerning the Buddha’s declarations, the implications of his point are worth considering. If there really is an objective moral principle of *dharma* operational in the universe, does it matter whether we call it God? When dealing with such a principle, do not the words we use matter less than the actions that flow from its realization?

Yet Gandhi himself usually exercised some caution in this area, identifying the highest principle with “Truth” (*satya*) rather than “God” (Gandhi 1950: 247). For Gandhi “Truth” signified a near 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).

It should be clear that Buddhists do not generally fit into the latter, nihilistic, camp; some vision of objective truth or “a way things are” definitely inspires those who have chosen to walk on the Buddhist path. On the other hand it is equally true that when Buddhists discuss the final nature of things they do not employ the word “God.” With all its connotations of an eternal, non-dependent nature, there appear to be irresolvable logical problems associated with any such idea. But “truth” itself is not an objectionable term from a Buddhist perspective. The word does not necessarily carry with it any substantival connotations: it simply suggests that there is “a way things are” or “a way events occur.” This way can be realized and accommodated in action, if not finally captured in words.

Depending on the context, the final truth in Buddhism may be identified with any one of a number of placeholders: no self, emptiness, interdependence, the Middle way, and so on. Interestingly, it is also sometimes given the appellation *Dharmakāya* or “body of the *dharma*.” Aside from referring to the truth of emptiness, this term also clearly suggests the idea of a natural moral law (*dharma*).

The idea that the highest realization contains an essential moral dimension is of course entirely consistent with Gandhi’s views. Gandhi adhered to the idea of a moral sensibility that is the natural, human expression of the Truth. This is *ahimsā*. It is the effort to embody this state that leads to the realization of the Truth. And from this realization, in turn, *ahimsā* effortlessly flows. Thus for Gandhi, the two are scarcely distinguishable:

Ahimsa and Truth are so intertwined it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin, or rather of a smooth unstamped metallic disc. Who can say, which is the obverse, and which is the reverse? (1950: 251)

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 be motivated by an intention marked by selfish interest or by hatred in doing so. Thus, a strict Jain interpretation of *ahimsā* 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 killing). It is, however, impossible to define the general conditions of 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 *ahimsā* Gandhi vacillates on whether to call unavoidable killing *himsā*. 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 With such a recognition, selfish intent and hatred become impossible. Thus for Gandhi, as for the Buddha, a pure, non-attached, “selfless” 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 *ahimsā*; he even went so far as to suggest that the language of *ahimsā* could be dropped in describing such conduct, so long as the correctness of the action was conceded (1950: 228). But, in general, he maintained the language of *ahimsā* even for such cases. In so doing, a negative understanding of

7. “The man who lives in the atman, who has subdued the demons in him and mastered the senses; who sees himself in all creatures and all creatures in himself, will make no distinction between relations and others. He will ever live as a servant of all, and will partake only of what remains after others have had their share. Of such a person it can be said, *kurvannapi na lipyate*, that he works, but is not bound by the effects of karma” (Gandhi 1993: 151).

ahimsā as “refraining from injury or killing” was displaced by a positive conception of *ahimsā* as a mental quality of selfless goodwill, of pure, universal love (1950: 186, 252). If this is one’s understanding the apparent absurdity is lost.

For Buddhists, as for Gandhi, a genuine realization of *ahimsā* implies a virtue that goes beyond a mere refraining from injury or killing. Just as the term *himsā* indicates something more than the objective occurrence of injurious effects, the term *ahimsā* indicates something more than a mere absence of such effects. The Buddhist tradition recognizes that a person who has advanced on the path acts lovingly, out of a basic compassionate orientation towards all beings seen in their suffering. Genuine *ahimsā* is thus understood positively; it does not merely indicate the absence of harmful intent, but in addition the actual presence of compassion. This compassion is the natural expression of spiritual awakening; it is likened to the feeling a mother has towards her own suffering child. This doctrine is especially developed in the Mahāyāna tradition, wherein great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) generally displaces *ahimsā* as the central ethical term.

As is the case in Gandhi’s ethical reflections, there are instances in specific Mahāyāna texts where, under exceptional circumstances, certain advanced spiritual beings, bodhisattvas, are described as engaging in “compassionate killing.”⁸ Such killing is undertaken when the bodhisattva psychically sees that there is no other way to stop a more damaging action from occurring. It is undertaken not only with the intent to minimize the suffering of potential victims, but also, importantly, out of a loving consideration for the would-be perpetrator who would suffer the karmic repercussions of the actions if he or she were to succeed in his or her attempt.⁹

And yet such passages are rare. It is interesting to note that they always involve bodhisattvas (beings on the way to awakening), and never Buddhas, (fully awakened beings). The Buddha is never depicted as engaging in acts of compassionate killing. There seems to be a deep intuition within the Buddhist tradition that the nature of

8. As the only means to stop a mass murder from occurring, for example. Such cases are fruitfully discussed in Harvey 2000: 135–140.

9. Such instances are depicted as acts of self-sacrifice, for there is the understanding that the bodhisattva too would suffer some negative karmic consequence, in spite of his good intent. See Harvey 2000: 136–37.

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 of spiritual realization. To act with love in one's heart, with a selfless 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 suffering upon oneself for the benefit of others. At points Gandhi even 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 subduing even ferocious wild beasts, a view that finds clear parallels in the Buddhist scriptures.¹⁰

Meditation

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 honesty” or self-awareness, a firmness in determination to observe one's mental states without self-deception as to their actual nature. This implies a concentrated effort to stick to the Truth (*satyāgraha*)

10. See Gandhi 1950: 232; Nāṇamoli 1992: 262–264. At a minimum the exclusion of the possibility of intentional killing by a Buddha may suggest recognition of the danger of providing a scriptural basis for this kind of “calculation-based” action. The potential folly of such a course is clear. The wisdom of adhering to a negative formulation of the central moral principle is equally obvious.

as opposed to viewing oneself through the distorted lens of complimentary self-images. In Buddhist terms, this can be seen as paralleling what is meant by “mindfulness meditation” (*smṛtyupasthāna*, Pali: *satipaṭṭhāna*). A necessary aspect of this meditation is a willingness to see and acknowledge the three poisons at work in one’s own mind (Nyanatiloka 166). This awareness naturally leads to conduct free from the poisons, which is to say, moral conduct.

Wisdom

In both the Gandhian and Buddhist traditions it is commonly understood that a person who is yet on the path to spiritual realization experiences the qualities of wisdom (the realization of emptiness, awakening, truth) and morality (nonviolence) as separate but progressively reinforcing. For a realized being they are no longer separate.

One of the obvious dangers of undertaking comparative analyses lies in the possibility of distorting the objects of comparison in order to find points of similarity. After all, Gandhi spoke in terms of both God and the Self. The Buddha did neither. The realization of God and the Self cannot be equated with the Buddhist realization of emptiness and no-self—or at least not without emptying the discussion of all literal meaning. But perhaps, in this context, this is precisely the point. In their final visions both point beyond words directly to the realm of compassionate action in the here and now.

The Buddha was not unique in teaching that the actualization of the noblest human potential precludes the possibility of violent action. Like Gandhi he considered such conduct to be possible only on the basis of a deluded, non-realized state. Basic to this ignorance is a deeply ingrained sense of “self” which images itself standing in opposition to “others.” Skillful action discourages this sense of division. In this light perhaps the essential point to understand concerning the path taught by the Buddha is not that which differentiates it from other religious teachings, but that which it shares with them. Identifying *ahimsā* as the essence of Buddhism may thus be taken as itself an instance of the principle in action.¹¹

11. It gives me great pleasure to acknowledge the aid of Mr. Wayne Codling in formulating the ideas found in this paper.

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