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AHIMSA IN BASIC HINDU SCRIPTURES, WITH REFERENCE TO COSMO-ETHICS (ECOLOGY)

Preface

The word *ahiṁsā* is often translated as "non-violence," especially owing to its use in the modern times as a method of social and political struggles. This translation like others such as non-hurting, non-killing, non-injury, etc., are no doubt correct, but like them it expresses only one of this word's many imports. This issue of the *Journal of Dharma* is an attempt to focus on a paramount meaning of the word that has to do with the non-destruction, and hence caring preservation, of all forms of life upon our planet, a concern whose urgency is being felt more and more acutely as days go by. Hence we couple *ahiṁsā* with ecology.

However, while *ahiṁsā* is an ancient concept with profound and polydimensional meanings – though, unfortunately, all too often misunderstood –, "ecology" indeed is a new word brought into currency in the late nineteen-thirties by a writer like H. G. Wells, (*The Shape of Things to Come*), and has caught on only even more recently, i.e., within the framework of the environmental questions. And because everyone understands to some extent at least what the environmental questions are, the meaning of "ecology" is not at all obscure.

Literature on the subject of ecology is already quite abundant. Religious thinkers, social thinkers, economists and natural scientists are coming together on environmental or ecological issues as they have never come together on anything else before. A most welcome development is indicated here.

We are heartened to see that especially in a field like theology a whole new branch is beginning to take shape with ecology as focus. So also is ethics. Nothing else has stirred things up to an equal degree in centuries. Even the other great crisis, namely, the fear of

nuclear destruction of the human race, which in itself has somewhat receded lately, owing to the recent shifts in super-power relations (perhaps illusorily only), has been incorporated into it by some imperceptible process, almost like a dependent auxiliary.

Now as to the two concepts, i.e., environmentalism and ecology, often treated like synonyms, the latter is deeper. But when we couple ecology with *ahiṁsā* it becomes even deeper because a cosmic dimension is added to it. That is because *ahiṁsā* is part of *dharma*, which is cosmo-ethical. Failure to grasp this all-important point has created much misunderstanding as to the nature of *ahiṁsā* as of *dharma* in general. Indian ethics is, fundamentally, cosmo-ethics, which means that ethical norms (or moral rules) are not necessarily those that put the world of human beings exclusively at the centre of the scheme, as if the environment or nature even when we seek to preserve it must somehow primarily serve human interests, chiefly the preservation of the human species.

What the Indian cosmo-ethics has for its world is something indefinitely larger than our planet, but that is so in principle. For in fact the planet (*bhūloka*) with all forms of life in it, is its immediate world. And man, while he has to take his place in a democracy of an indefinite number of living species, is nonetheless not only their crown in an evolutionary-hierarchical sense but also their priest, first-fruit and spiritual guardian. In this cosmo-ethical scheme man's place, his destiny and his significance are only heightened and in no way lessened. These things furnish the clue to the paramount meaning of *ahiṁsā* as it is coupled with ecology.

Ahimsa in the Vedas

The word *ahiṁsā* is the negative of *hiṁsā*, a noun formed from the verb *hiṁs*, itself derived from the root *han*, meaning to 'kill', 'injure', 'destroy', as well as 'commit an act of violence.' In the Vedas, the compound *hiṁsā-karman* (*hiṁsā*-act) stands for injury, harm, destruction or murder, caused by magical rites, which were condemned as sinful. But these rites too are of the generic nature of *yāga*, or sacrifice, often (not always) used as antithesis of *yajña* or good and holy sacrifice. Only *yajñas* can promote the truly religious goals of earthly well-being (*abhyudaya*) and eternal felicity (*niḥśreyasa*). Śabara the

great commentator of the *Mīmāmsā-Sūtras, a propos* 1.1.2. of that manual, distinguishes between good and bad sacrifices. The bad ones are *śneya*, intended to bring harm upon one's enemies or other victims. The good ones, on the contrary, are of the nature of *dharma* and in conformity with reality (*artha*). The *śneya* ones are *anartha* (unreal, discordant) and hence bad. Śabara harks back to the Vedas themselves when he further declares that magical *śneya* sacrifices, being *anartha* are *hiṁsā* and "*hiṁsā* is forbidden" (*hiṁsā hi pratiṣiddhati*). And *śneya* is not to be performed since it is a weapon only for one who wishes to do harm (*yo hi hiṁsitum icchet tasya ayam upāya*).

Accordingly, *ahiṁsā* has a literal meaning, i.e., the opposite of *hiṁsā*, and a deeper, semantic meaning, i.e., the deliberate disavowal of *hiṁsā* acts by one who has the technical know-how for performing them. The deliberate refusal to use such power is already seen as a moral achievement, which accords with the benign office of *yajña*, even accentuating its spiritual potency, with the addition of the moral dimension. This original meaning has remained in the concept of *ahiṁsā* all through history, coming to new life in several later instances but most notably in the *Bhagavatgītā*.

The Developments in the Upanisads

Now, while the purely moral sense has always remained at the centre of the tradition as the silent companion of *yajña*, in many ways even transforming the latter, a specific meaning, i.e., of non-taking of life – in what we have described as cosmo-ethical sense – is added, beginning with some of the Upaniṣads. These Upaniṣads recognize that even though *yajña* is benign, and accords with pure morality, it might entail some *hiṁsā* if it has to do with animal sacrifice. A significant testimony to this new insight is found in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* where the very word *ahiṁsā* or (sometimes) a synonym is employed.

But before we turn to the *Chāndogya*, let us pause at an important but apposite passage in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (that has gripped even poet T.S. Eliot), i.e., 5.2.1–3, which uses three *da*-based expressions: *dāmyata* (have self-control); *datta* (give); *dayadhvam* (have compassion). The foundations for formulating *ahiṁsā* as positive compassion (*dayā*) have been laid here.

There are good reasons for believing that this and other *Upaniṣadic* texts pre-date Buddha and Mahāvīra, so that the grounds of their insight have already been laid. This furnishes the background for Buddha's teaching, the earliest formulation of which is found in the *Sāmanna-phala-Sūttam*, 2.5.45: "A monk, refusing to harm any creature, moves about as a compassionate man, with sympathy for the well-being of all species."[1]

Mahāvīra promulgated *ahiṁsā* with almost literal and fundamentalist passion. And because of that fact the doctrine has often come to be especially associated with Jainism. Hence M. Hiriyanna, a wise and perspicacious scholar, quite aptly remarks: "Of the various virtues to be cultivated by the Jains, *ahiṁsā* occupies the foremost place. The doctrine of *ahiṁsā* is no doubt very old in India, but the way in which it is made to pervade the whole conduct is peculiarly Jain."[2]

Now let us turn to the *Chāndogya* and pause at the spots where the actual word *ahiṁsā* is used. In the first, i.e., 3.17.4., we notice the word placed within a cluster of associated virtues, along with penance (*tapaḥ*), giving (*dānam*), uprightness (*ārjavam*) and truth-speaking (*satya-vacanam*). These virtues are described as more efficacious for the sacrifice than the fees given to the priests.

There is one other spot in this *Upaniṣad* where the word occurs, but in such a strikingly unique way as to warrant its being considered separately as the locus classicus of what is taken up and developed by Śankara in his Vedāntic commentaries. It is significant that it should appear in the very conclusion of this great Upaniṣad, as part of its final or climactic teaching: "This Brahmā told to Prajapati, Prajapati to Manu, Manu to mankind. . . .He who has learned the Veda. . .who establishes all his senses in the *Ātman* (*ātmani sarvendriyāni saṁpratiṣṭhāpya*) who comports himself *ahiṁsā*-wise towards all beings (*ahiṁsan sarvabhūtani*) who conducts himself even thus *(sa khalu evam vartayan)*, having attained to the Brahmā-world [i e., the plane of knowledge transi-

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1. *paṇātipātaṁ pahāya dayāpanno sabbapāna-bhūtā anukampī viharati*, from the *Dīghanikāya*, Vol. I *(Sīlakhaṇḍa Vagga)*, Nalanda Devanagari-Pali Series, Pub. under the general editorship of Bhikku K. Kasyap, Pali Publications Board (Bihar Government), Bihar, India, 1958, p. 55.

2. M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, London, G. Allen & Unwin, 1956 impression, p. 67.

tional to pure gnosis] will not return hither, yea he will not return (*na ca punar āvartate, na ca punar āvartate*)," 8.15.1.

Ahimsa in Sankara's Vedantic Commentaries

It has become quite clear that establishing one's senses in the *Ātman* and comporting oneself *ahiṁsā*-wise towards all beings go hand in hand, the latter in a profound sense actually as complementary to the former. The point of interest to us presently is that *ahiṁsā*, along with establishment of one's senses in the *Ātman*, falls within the supreme teaching of the Upaniṣads, i.e., self-knowledge (or spiritual knowledge), which according to Śankara, is fully brought to light in the final three chapters – 6 to 8 – of the *Chāndogya*. *Ahiṁsā* appears as a component in the very praxis of this supreme knowledge.

The words "all beings" (*sarva bhūtani)* are of fairly frequent occurrence in Hindu scriptures, beginning with the *Puruṣa Sūkta* of the *Ṛg Veda* (10.90). "All beings," the *Sūkta* says, emerged from the lowest quarter of the dismembered body of *Puruṣa*. But the new thing about our *Chāndogya* passage is the docking of "all beings" with *ahiṁsā*, putting both concepts together. Here then *ahiṁsā* is depicted as a mode of existence towards all beings (*ahiṁsan sarvabhūtani*). It is thus grounded in a cosmic mysticism of a profound philosophical character. Further, it is put forward as teaching and as instruction (*upadeśa, nirdeśa*).

A proper effort to correctly understand the Upaniṣadic teachings and instructions would have to be through the commentaries of Śankara, although he lived much later, i.e., A.D. 780–812. And to this end his commentary on the *Brahma Sūtra* must also be consulted concurrently. To take a cue from that commentary, *a propos* aphorism 2.3. 44, Śankara points out that the very word "being" (lower case 'b', not capital 'B' as in Being, as we might put it) signifies unmoving and moving creatures on account of . . . the expression "to exist *ahiṁsā*-wise towards all beings."[3] This remark is appended to an exegesis Śankara has given to the fuller scriptural meaning of "all beings." And that exegesis is related to another *Chāndogya* passage (3.12.6) which in turn is a reference to

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3. *atra bhūtaśabdena jīva pradhānāni sthāvara-jangamāni nirdiśati. ahiṁsā sarva-bhūtāni . . . . iti prayogāt.*

the *Puruṣa Sūkta*. Śankara here brings together the two aspects of *Puruṣa* (in the sense of *Brahman*), i.e., its "filling all and residing in all (beings)" (*sarva pūraṇāt puri śayanāt ca*). The net import of all this is that *ahiṁsā* is the way one who is devoted to the quest of the knowledge of *Brahman* experiences his own existence within the organic wholeness of the cosmic community of beings, while at the same time establishing his senses in the *Ātman*.

All of this comes in the course of a fuller inquiry into the meaning of the great *Chāndogya* passage under consideration. But there arises a new problem. The complete clause of the statement of the Upaniṣad provides for an exception, i.e., "conducting oneself *ahiṁsā*-wise towards all beings except in the *tīrthas*" (*anyatra tīrthebhyaḥ*). Now, what is a *tīrtha*? Conventionally, it means a sacred spot or a place of pilgrimage. But Śankara defines it as "a sacred rite enjoined by the Veda" (*śāstrānujña viṣaya*). In short it means a Vedic sacrifice, which is not covered by the *ahiṁsā* precept. The Vedic injunction as to sacrifice, which may entail killing of victims, and the *ahiṁsā* precept are both of absolute value, but conflicting. Śankara, however, simply leaves the matter there but he reports a casuistic solution of some exegetes, though a very weighty one: "The *tīrtha* exceptions too are in actuality of the nature of *ahiṁsā* (*tīrthebhyah . . . ahiṁsaiva . . .*)." The reasoning seems to be that even the killing of animal victims is transformed into *ahiṁsā* by reason of the supreme holiness of the Vedic act. (This was the well-known view of Manu.)

The search for other cauistic explanations were also afoot. One of them was that the two-fold directive on *ahiṁsā* and establishing the senses on the *Ātman* was aimed at the monks and was not binding on the laity – and on the priests, under the circumstances of the Vedic sacrifice. But the *Brahma Sūtrā* 3.4.48 and 49, ruled that the directive applied to both the monks and all others (*maunavat itareṣām api upadeśāt, sūtrā* 49). And Śankara comments on these aphorisms in complete agreement.

Now, it is most fascinating to discover that in applying precepts of moral perfection Śankara was not a literalist. What he himself proposes is something other than casuistry, namely irony or humour. Thus while discussing our *Chāndogya* text he suggests that even a wandering monk cannot literally live up to the *ahiṁsā* precept "for, inasmuch as he

receives alms, he troubles – causes pain to – others" (*bhikṣā-nimittam . . . aḍanādināpi paraptḍā syāt*).

Finally, it is very important to note the essential character of the *ahiṁsā* teaching in the *Chāndogya* text: it is not presented as a concept *per se*, but as a precept for monks as well as others within, and for, the effective practice of spiritual knowledge. However, it was attached to a mystical cosmology of organic wholeness in which "all beings" subsist. But to the extent that the mystically conceived cosmos is deemed capable of being viewed, and even necessarily having to be viewed, under the category of concrete biological life, as present in at least the visible and tangible species in the world of beings, though not "all beings" indefinitely extended, a certain conception of its associate, i.e., *ahiṁsā* as a secular ethical principle of universal relevance became not only possible but inevitable. For otherwise, how could hunters, *Chanḍālas* and others be dissuaded from killing animals or their practices be condemned, inasmuch as their conduct indeed is not governed by the norms of spiritual knowledge as taught by the Upaniṣads? Here then the ground has been prepared for the general ethical principle of reverence for life. Such a powerful extrapolation leading to great results in the expansion of the ethical doctrine of *ahiṁsā*, at times even in a secular sense, is what we witness in a variety of developments – in Buddhism and Jainism and also in the Epics and Purāṇas. This way great expressions of cosmo-ethics, quite relevant even to secular views of world and life, have been produced. So then we are led to the next heading.

The Evolution of Ahimsa to the Position of Supreme Dharma

That *ahiṁsā* was originally spawned in the Vedas, later making its decisive appearance in the Upaniṣads, is beyond doubt. In the Upaniṣads it became an important item in the praxis of spiritual (*Brahman*) knowledge.

It kept on evolving further through the Epics and the Purāṇas. The evolution took place in concert with Buddhism and Jainism. One difference is that while sometimes the Epics and the Purāṇas may have equivocated somewhat in deference to the Vedic obligation of sacrifice, the Buddhists and the Jainas adamently stuck to the non-exceptional, universal character of the precept, turning their criticism unequivocally against all sacrifice.

The Epics and the Purāṇas were directly beholden to the Vedas but efforts can be seen taking place within them, aimed at bringing the sacrificial rites categorically under ethical *ahiṁsā*, entailing no rule of exception. This required the re-grasp of *dharma*, resulting in expanding its meaning. In *Ṛg Veda* 90.16 sacrifice is defined as the *first of dharmas* (*dharmāṇi prathamāni*). Śabara cites this *a propos Mīmāmsā Sūtra*, 1.1.2 (earlier referred to) but without touching upon the question of *ahiṁsā*. On the other hand, in the *Mahābhārata Epic*, among a number of elaborate discussions on *ahiṁsā* some definitions of it are given: "*ahiṁsā* is the supreme *dharma* (*ahiṁsā paramo dharma*) to be chosen by all beings;" "*ahiṁsā* is the quintessence of all *dharmas*."[4] It means that "one bound by *Brahman* should never harm any creature whatsoever."[5] Its opposite, i.e., *hiṁsā* is declared as *adharma*.[6] However, it was generally held that *ahiṁsā* is the true character of *dharma* as such, based on the primacy of Vedic philosophy.[7] The Epic abounds in maxims that extol *ahiṁsā*. It is to be known as the *dharma* of all beings, (i.e., not only of humans) and hence as the most excellent,[8] and so on.

The Purāṇas, obviously of a later date, repeat this idea of the Epic frequently, equating it with all the highly regarded virtues: e.g., "*ahiṁsā* is the supreme *dharma* . . . the supreme "asceticism" (*tapaḥ*) . . . supreme "giving" (*dānam*)," says the *Padma Purāṇa*.[9] The *Kurma Purāṇa* has it that there is "no greater happiness" (*nāsti param sukham*) than *ahiṁsā* the supreme *dharma*."[10] The *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* calls it the "doorway to *dharma*" (*dharmasya dvāram*).[11] The *Matsya Purāṇa* recounts a "dialogue of the sages on the eve of a sacrifice" (*yajñārambhe devarṣi samvāda*). There it is reported, "the sages do not acclaim sacrifices involving injury [to animal victims]; instead [they prescribe oblations of] gathered roots,

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4. e.g., *Ādi Parva*, 11. 12. 12; *Anuśasāna Parva* 115.25. *Note:* Citations from the *Mahābhārata*, unless otherwise mentioned are from the Critical Edition published from the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, Poona
5. *Loc cit.*
6. *Aśvamedha Parva*, 43. 19.
7. *Anuśāsana Parva*, 13. 115. 2.
8. *ahiṁsā sarva bhūteṣu dharma jyāyastaram viduḥ Drona Parva*, 192. 38.
9. *ahiṁsā paramo dharma, ahiṁsā param tapah, ahiṁsā paramaṁ dānam.*
10. *ahiṁsā paramo dharmah, nāsti ahiṁsāyā paraṁ sukham, Kūrma Purāna*, II. 11. 13, 14; Cf. P.V. Kane, Ed., *History of the Dharma Sastra*, Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, Vol. V, pt. II, 1977, p. 946.
11. *Brahmāṇḍa Purāna*, II. 31. 35; Cf. from Kane, *Ibid.*

fruits and vegetables."[12] As a side note, such conduct is described as the foundation of *sanātana dharma* [perhaps not in the current sense referring to the Hindu religion as such].

Ahimsa in the Wider List of Virtues

The word *dharma* itself has *virtue* as one of its meanings, i.e., in the sense of the Greek *aretē*. Both *dharma* and *aretē* have certain common ranges of meanings, some of which are captured in respective metaphysics. The Greek list of *aretai* and the Indian list of *dharmas* have something in common in an ethical sense too. The ethical import is in some Indian texts specified as *satguṇa* or *ātmaguṇa*.

The Greeks produced a list of cardinal virtues–Wisdom, Courage, Sobriety and Justice. However, there is actually no Indian counterpart to the concept 'cardinal' although some writers [e.g., Sir M. Monier Williams in his *Dictionary*] would call *ahiṁsā* a 'cardinal virtue' in a loose sense. Of course a writer could easily be misled because *ahiṁsā* is called *supreme dharma* (*paramo dharma*) in many texts.

The many Indian lists of virtues almost always include *ahiṁsā* (some times expressed by synonyms like *bhūtadayā*, kindness to creatures, and *dayābhāva*, kindliness), along with several other virtues such as "serenity, celibacy, asceticism, purity, compassion, forbearance and courage,"[13] or "serenity, good will, cleanliness, earnestness, graciousness, strength of mind and desirelessness."[14] Some of these are really theological virtues.

Any discussion of *adharma* must take account of the *Dharma śāstras* and other *smṛtis* in which *ahiṁsā* figures very largely. Most important of these are *Manu Smṛti*, then *Gautama Dharma Sūtra*, *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* and *Vaikhānasa Smārta Sūtra*. All these, especially *Manu Smṛti* contain elaborate lists of virtues–and also sins to be avoided. *Hiṁsā* is a great sin, whether done by mind, word or deed, whether directed against

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12. *tasmāt na hiṁsā yajñam na praśamśanti maharsaya; uncho mūlam phalam śākamuda-pātraṁ tapodhanāh, Mātsya Purāṇa*, 143, 30–32.
13. *dayābhāva śānti brahmacarya tapah pavitratā, karuṇā, kṣama dhairya, Mātsya Puranā*, 143. 33.
14. *dayā sarva-bhūteṣu śantir anasūya śaucam anayaso mangalam akarpanyam aspṛheti*; *Gautama Dharma Sūtra*, VIII. 24-25; Cf. Kane, *op. cit.* Vol. V. pt II. p. 945.

humans or animals. Taking non-human life is as sinful as murder of humans.[15] While, as the champion of Vedic orthodoxy, Manu considers sacrificial killing of animals in Vedic rites as really *ahiṁsā* in essence, he provides for the observance of sacrifice in five new, purely ethical modes.[16] These five are: *Brahma-yajña* (study and teaching of Vedānta); *Pitṛyajña* (sacred duty to ancestors as well as sacred duty to posterity by ensuring continuation of the human race, not least by having children); *Devayajña* (worship of the Divine beings); *Nṛyajña* (feeding people); *Bhūtayajña* (fostering of all life, especially by feeding animals). Now these five come in a single package. Whether Manu knew of the threat to the continuation of the human race and feared the deprivation of human need for food or whether he anticipated the possible destruction of all life on the planet we have no way of telling. In any case his vision appears to be ultramodern. In light of such a grand vision, his apparent acceptance of animal sacrifice, albeit calling it still *ahiṁsā*, would appear to be a small matter – and might be far superior, ethically, to the literalist-fundamentalist stance of those who saw the ritual sacrifice enjoined by the Veda in a contrary fashion. Clearly, Manu brings the whole weight of the Hindu tradition on the side of what we would today call ecology – via *ahiṁsā* and associated virtues.

Now in the context of *Manu Smṛti* and other texts just mentioned there comes up another important matter. That is with regard to the division of the virtues as inward (*yama*) and outward (*niyama*). This division was accomplished under a perfect rationale by the *Yoga Sūtra* of Patanjali. In that work, *yama*, pertaining to one's outward conduct, i.e., in relation to the cosmos and to others, the animals included, and *niyama*, pertaining to one's inward self-conduct, i.e., purely in relation to oneself, are listed and expanded in chapter II, aphorisms 30–45. They each consist of five principles. *Ahiṁsā* falls in the *yama* group, along with *satya* (truth-speaking) non-coveting (*asteya*), celibacy (*brahmacarya*) and non-owning (*aparigraha*). (The five of the *niyama* group do not come into our purview at present). The *Kūrma Purāṇa* follows the *Yoga Sūtrā* faithfully in respect of these two groups of five virtues.[17]

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15. *Manusmṛti*, V. 44, 45, 51.
16. *Ibid.*, III. 70–74; IV. 21.
17. *Kūrma Purāna*, II. 11. 13–15; Cf. Kane, *op. cit.*

The five *Yamas* are held in common by the whole of the Indian tradition. The Jainas, however, calls them *vratas* (vows). The *Yoga Sūtra* with Vyāsa's commentary uses the word *mahā-vrata*[18] (great vows). And it is most significant that Vyāsa in expounding it, dwells mostly on the one virtue, i.e., *ahiṁsā*, in order to stress, in respect of it, the universal nature of the obligation, unrestricted by considerations of caste (profession), place, time or circumstances.[19] Vyāsa thus repudiates the view (held by some) that it is, for instance, permissible for fishermen to kill fish. And in pointed reference to the *Chāndogya* passage we have discussed, he declares that a yogi must resolve: "I will not slay (animals) even for the sacred Vedic rite" (*na tīrthe haniṣyāmi iti*).

Ahimsa in the Bhagavadgita

Inasmuch as we understand the essential cosmo-ethical character to be primary, i.e., in balance, for *ahiṁsā* as it develops into a very definite concept, we see the *Bhagavadgītā* to be fully participating in it. However, the word itself occurs in that scripture just four times, and each time in a cluster with other concepts. And, strikingly enough, nowhere does it call *ahiṁsā* the supreme *dharma*. The four places in which it appears are:

(1) X. 5, along with other virtues, i.e., equanimity, (*samatā*), contentment (*tuṣṭi*), asceticism (*tapaḥ*), giving (*dānam*) and repute-disrepute (*yaśo 'yaśaḥ*) which are all described as modalities of beings (*bhāva-bhūtānām*) that proceed from the Divine.

(2) XII. 7–11, in a cluster that includes humility (*amānitvam*), integrity (*aḍambhitvam*), patience (*kṣānti*) and so on.

(3) XVI. 1–3, as one in a group of virtues along with fearlessness, (*abhayam*), study (*svādhyāya*), fortitude (*dhṛti*) and non-malice (*adroha*).

(4) XVII. 14 as an item in a stock of virtues such as physical reverence of gods, teachers, the wise and the holy (*deva-dvija-guru-pūjanam*) and such other things, all called bodily asceticism (*śarīram tapaḥ*). [Note that self-mortification is not involved in this].

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18. *Yoga Sūtra*, II. 31.
19. *jāti kāla deśa samaya anavicchinnā sarva bhauma mahāvratam, Loc cit.*

The question can always be raised: why does the *Bhagavadgītā* not subscribe to the Epic, Smṛti, Purāṇa and other definitions of *ahiṁsā* as the supreme *dharma*? However, any proper discussion of this would be far too deep for ethics or even cosmo-ethics alone to handle. Firstly, it is necessary to recall that the *Bhagavadgītā* discourse is a divinely assisted struggle on the part of a man [perhaps, of Man] to achieve an understanding of the truth of things as a whole, subsuming under it the cycles of becoming and passing away. It cannot be broken down to ethics or even cosmo-ethics, although the end of the whole struggle expressed in the vision on the one hand, and in the resolve, "I shall do thy word," should be wholesomely conceived as nothing but *ahiṁsā*, that is, however, not as a single concept but as the quintessence of all course-of-conduct. While there is no breaking down of the *Bhagavadgītā* experience to ethics or even cosmo-ethics, it is that alone which can emerge out of it, especially as it is re-lived in the context of our contemporary threat to all life, the slow corroding destruction that we face in the world today. Everything is reversible because everything is a matter of choice dictated by the times. Soren Kierkegaard insisted on the teleological suspension of the ethical. But are we not facing today the imperative of a cosmo-ethical suspension of the teleological?

Now, whilst we are here not engaged in any *Bhagavadgītā* exegesis as such, some questions need to be faced. One of them is, does the *Bhagavadgītā* advocate *ahiṁsā*, especially in view of the constant urging on the part of Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna to fight? In a sense we are obligated to think on this question in terms of the sheer ethical principles of non-violence as opposed to violence, because even a person who fights and kills his human adversaries in the battle could be ecologically responsible – and ecology in its relation to *ahiṁsā* is what we are presently concerned about. And that is the reason why we should distinguish cosmo-ethics from ethics in the usual sense of having only to do with relations with human beings. Unfortunately, much of the world has never conceived of cosmo-ethics, as all their ethics have had only to do with prescriptive or descriptive human relationships or at best a combination of the two.

Arguably, one can demonstrate that there is an ethics of non-violence in human relationships in the *Bhagavadgītā*, but that is not our present task. But that a great cosmo-ethical imperative emerges

out of its vision of the truth of things as a whole seems to be beyond argument. And it accords entirely with *ahiṁsā*, governing one's relation to all beings.

There is a medieval writer on the *Bhagavadgītā*, who might be singled out in this respect. That is Jñāneśwar (A.D., 1275–1296), a precocious poet and saint of Maharastra, who wrote in the Marathi language. His Commentary *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* (often called *Jñāneśwarī*) on the *Bhagavadgītā*, consisting of 9000 stanzas is an important work, which among other things devotes a part of it (stanzas 216–318, plus a few more in scattered places) to a meditation on the *Bhagavadgītā*'s idea of *ahiṁsā*. Jñāneśwar's meditation concentrates largely on kindness to animals. It begins with a strong condemnation of Vedic rites which involves slaughter of animal victims. He seems to recognize that the Vedic rites have as one of their goals the fostering of all life. But he sees an irony there: It "is as if one should break off the branches of a tree to form a fence around the trunk; cut off his arm and sell it in order to satisfy his hunger, or demolish a temple and then use the stone to build a wall round the god."[20] Even the traditional āyurvedic medicine is criticized inasmuch as it involved destruction of plant and animal life in order to save human life.[21] Jñāneśwar depicts a man of *ahiṁsā*. One of the descriptions is this: "His look is steady and his brow unruffled, for he holds that the universal spirit is in all beings, and so he usually avoids looking at them lest this spirit be harmed. Should his inward kindliness impel him to look at another [his glance brings comfort] .... The effect of his look on all creatures is such that even the tortoise does not know the depth of his tenderness."[22]

Finally, as is the case with the *Bhagavadgītā* itself, Jnaneśwar's ideal virtue of *ahiṁsā* is linked with "wisdom." But there is more in his thought than this linkage, for in true Indian fashion Jnaneśwar looks to a person of *ahiṁsā* in its perfection, who therefore is an *avatāra* of wisdom. "When thou seest that a man has entirely renounced the doing of harm in speech, in thought or in outward action know him to be an abundant store-house of wisdom, indeed he is the very incarnation of wisdom. If thou dost desire to understand this harmlessness (*ahiṁsā*) which is heard, spoken

20. See *Jñaneśwarī* (*Bhavartha-dīpika*), trans. from the Marathi by G. Pradhan, ed., by H.M. Lambert, Vol. II., London, G. Allen & Unwin, 1969, Ch. XIII, esp. stanzas 218, 219.
21. *Ibid.*, stanzas 224–229.
22. *Ibid.*, stanzas 272–276.

or written of in books, we have only to look at such a man."[23] Clearly, the Indian ideal of the *Jivan-mukta* (or *avatāra*) is behind this thought. There again the *Bhagavadgītā* is paradigmatic.

Finally, then, in the way the Hindu scriptures treat *ahiṁsā* there has always been in the background a concern with what they consistently call "all beings," together with an obligation to do right by "all beings," not just to do right by human beings. That is the reason why Indian ethics – Hindu, Buddhist or Jaina – is inevitably cosmo-ethics, and it certainly transcends, both in scope and spirit, what we now call ecology – transcends it, nevertheless, inclusively. As a result, ecology becomes a deeper notion and of perennial value, rather than a merely hurried and nervous response to a crisis of the human race, one of its own making, in its relation to the environment, with the welfare of the human race alone in view. But ecology properly understood can serve as a meditation between cosmo-ethics and environmental ethics.

23. *Ibid.*, stanzas 310–312.