

## PERSPECTIVES ON NON-VIOLENCE IN THE MOKSA-DHARMA-PARVAN OF THE MAHABHARATA

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It might seem that the Mahabharata will have little to offer by way of teachings on the subject of non-violence. It is after all primarily an epic tale of conflict, quarrel, war and triumph, with several lengthy passages devoted to descriptions of battle and the prowess and heroism of its principal protagonists. Furthermore, the best known of all the Mahabharata's passages of religious instruction is the Bhagavad-gita, which has as its initial premise the assertion that a warrior must wage war, both as an act of religious duty and as a form of Yoga that can lead to salvation. Hence Krsna demands of Arjuna at the very beginning of his exposition, *tasmad yudhyasva bharata*, 'Therefore, Bharata, you should wage war.' (2.18)

But as the epic itself comments: *yan nehasti na tat kvacit*, "Whatever is not here is not to be found anywhere" (1.56.33). And as the ideal of non-violence certainly exists in Indian thought it is logical to search for it within the vast text of the Mahabharata. In fact the epic confronts the question of non-violence in a number of different ways. We may note the attitude of Yudhisthira, which I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> as a ksatriya who displays a consistent distaste for warfare. Whenever the subject of armed resistance is raised, we find that most virtuous of all the epic's characters arguing against such a course of action. In the Udyoga-parvan, Yudhisthira compares the behaviour of warriors to that of dogs—wagging their tails, showing their teeth, barking and finally fighting with each other (5.70.71). His conclusion concerning the acts of violence perceived by warriors as a religious duty is *papah ksatriya-dharmo 'yam*, the dharma followed by ksatriyas is nothing more than sin (5.70.46).

In other parts of the Mahabharata we encounter a vast array of religious teachers providing instruction to the main characters. Many of these passages are contained in Anusasana-parvan and it is here that we

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find Bhishma extolling the virtues of avoiding the eating of meat. This discourse is prompted by Yudhishthira's question as to why offerings of animal flesh are made to the ancestors as a part of the *śraddha* ritual when Bhishma has already proclaimed many times that non-violence is the highest form of dharma, *ahimsa paramo dharma ity uktam bahusas tvaya* (13.116.1). In Chapters 116 and 117, Bhishma praises abstention from meat as an act of compassion that brings benefits in the afterlife greater than any derived from religious rituals. And, finally, we might also note that even the Bhagavad-gita, with its characteristic tendency towards paradox, expresses its approval for the practice of non-violence on two occasions (13.7, 16.2).

In this article, however, I wish to look specifically at the epic's teachings on the science of *moksa* or salvation from rebirth. After the great conflict at Kuruksetra is over, the surviving warriors of Pandava faction gather around the fallen Bhishma who lies dying on the field, his body shot through with innumerable arrows from the bow of Arjuna. Yudhishthira, the new king of the Kauravas, then receives instructions from the stricken patriarch of the clan in a sequence that covers most of the Santi and Anusasana-parvans. The instruction begins with a discourse on the dharma of kingship, the Raja-dharma-parvan, and this is followed by the Moksa-dharma-parvan, a lengthy exposition on the forms of dharma that aim at release from rebirth. Spanning 186 chapters of the Santi-parvan (chs 168 to 353 of the Critical Edition), the Moksa-dharma-parvan contains a notable range of material, some of it only connected to the subject of salvation in the very loosest manner.

The passage consists of a collection of treatises of varying lengths on various subjects. Structurally, it appears that a redactor of the parvan had before him a selection of pieces and he has tried to put them together in something of a thematic order, using the device of questions put by Yudhishthira to Bhishma to introduce each of them.<sup>2</sup> These introductory questions are of interest mainly because they reveal what the redactor felt was the main theme of a particular treatise. There is frequent condemnation of the worthlessness of material gain and corresponding praise of the mood of renunciation through which the seeker of salvation gives up any aspiration for material success and accepts whatever fate befalls him. Other passages use Samkhya analysis to explain the nature of

this reality, leading to the conclusion that the true self is different from matter and is of a transcendent substance, whilst other teachings concentrate on the specific mode of conduct to be followed by the aspirant based on withdrawal from society and the practice of various forms of Yoga technique. Extensive sections of the Moksa-dharma-parvan display a theistic tendency and emphasise the glory and supremacy of Visnu as the Supreme Deity.<sup>3</sup> Indeed the longest of all the treatises, the Nara-narayaniyam (which amounts to 1059 slokas or 15% of the total Moksa-dharma-parvan), is a notable exposition of Vaisnava theism, based perhaps on the teachings of the Pañcaratra sect.

Clearly most of the passages included in the Moksa-dharma-parvan are the work of writers from the ascetic tradition that emerged in North India around two and a half thousand years ago. Within this strand of religious thought there were many who regarded the Vedas and the religion they advocated as redundant and inherently flawed by a materialistic orientation. The teachings of the Moksa-dharma-parvan, however, do not share this point of view. They praise the status of a true brahmana and their attitude is that the Vedas represent a perfect revelation that has been misinterpreted by men of later times who did not share their transcendentalism. Thus we frequently find the attempt being made to reconcile Vedic orthodoxy with the ascetic imperative towards renunciation and salvation, and this is a significant factor for the present discussion when we consider the Moksa-dharma's attitude towards the Vedic animal sacrifice. Finally, I have made the decision not to confine my consideration quite exclusively to this one section of the epic. In the Asvamedha-parvan we have a treatise spanning thirty-five chapters that is known as the Anugita. Although it purports to be a recapitulation by Krsna of the principal doctrines he expounded in the Bhagavad-gita, this linkage is essentially spurious, for the Anugita makes no reference at all to the karma-yoga and the theism that are fundamental to the Gita's thought. The material it does contain is in fact very similar to passages of the Moksa-dharma, basing its thought on the call for renunciation, Samkhya analysis of the world and the Yoga techniques that bring salvation. Because of this close connection, I felt it was appropriate to include this passage in my consideration of the perspectives on non-violence in the Mahabharata's teachings on salvation and I hope the reader will forgive me for a somewhat arbitrary decision.

I wish to look now at where the Moksa-dharma and the Anugita refer to the issue of non-violence and why they consider the question germane to the ideas with which they are principally concerned. As I stated earlier, these texts contain a wide range of subject matters but at the risk oversimplifying, I would urge that the following six points represent the main themes that they pursue:

1. Rejection of hopes for happiness through material success.
2. Renunciation of the world and developing a mood of world indifference.
3. Philosophical analysis of the nature of reality on the basis of Samkhya.
4. Yoga techniques to be adopted in pursuit of the goal of salvation.
5. The ideal lifestyle to be followed by one who is seeking salvation.
6. Devotion to the Supreme Deity, Visnu/Narayana

From this analysis it is apparent that references to non-violence will be found primarily in those treatises concerned with renunciation and the lifestyle of an ascetic. The extensive passages that consider the structure of the material existence naturally are not concerned with non-violence<sup>4</sup> and nor are those that concentrate on the glorification of the Deity. Similarly, where Yoga techniques are precisely recounted there is no call for consideration of non-violence except where the treatise moves on to teach about the lifestyle that must be followed by one who pursues these techniques. It is for this reason that Brockington remarks that outside of specific chapters 'ahimsa is not prominent . . . in the *Moksadharma*.'<sup>5</sup> Reference is made to non-violence or ahimsa only where renunciation is being stressed or the ideal lifestyle of an ascetic is being delineated.

Hence the first point that must be noted is that many of the individual treatises included in the Moksa-dharma make no reference whatsoever to the question of non-violence. In most instances this is because any such consideration would be irrelevant to the subject matter of that passage. Where, for example, the structure of matter is being analysed, as in the Vasistha-Karalajanaka-Samvada (Chs 291-296) or the Yajñavalkya-

Janaka-Samvada (Chs 298-306), there is no reason to expect the text to include any emphasis on the practice of ahimsa. Similarly, Chapters 200 to 203, which extol the glories of Visnu, are not concerned with how the devotee should conduct himself and give no instructions in that direction. Where, however, the discussion turns towards renunciation and the lifestyle to be followed by one seeking salvation, non-violence or non-harming is usually included in the list of virtues that must be acquired and in some cases it is presented as the most important of these. Thus throughout the Moksa-dharma we find repeated references to non-violence as being a part of the path that leads to salvation.

As noted earlier, the structure of the Moksa-dharma seems to have been arranged by a redactor on broad thematic lines. Thus, for example, the first six treatises (Chs 168-173) discuss renunciation of the world, whilst the three treatises contained in Chapters 200 to 202 are clearly placed together because of their Vaisnava orientation. Chapters 251 and 252 contain 46 verses of conversation between Bhishma and Yudhishthira, and hence one may presume that these are the composition of the redactor. The topic of discussion here is the nature of dharma and the difficulties inherent in determining what is righteous conduct and what is wickedness. Although no reference is made to non-violence in these chapters, the seven treatises that follow (Chs 253-264) seem to be grouped together by the redactor because they have ahimsa as their common theme.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, it would appear that their connection with the discussions in Chapters 251 and 252 is to be found in the point made by Yudhishthira that it is very difficult to precisely determine what is dharma and what is adharma. Much of the discussion that occurs in the ensuing passages focuses on the practice of Vedic animal sacrifice. As animal sacrifice involves acts of violence it might be regarded as adharma, but as it is prescribed by the Vedas some people will insist on its dharmic nature. Hence it might be more accurate to state that the unifying theme of these treatises is the tension that exists between renunciation and Vedic ritual, a tension that has the act of ritual violence as its focal point.

Chapter 265 and 266 again consist of a discussion between Bhishma and Yudhishthira and hence one may presume that 264 represents the end of the treatises grouped together by the redactor in his section on non-violence. The seven passages included in this section are as follows:

1. The Tuladhara-Jajali-Samvada (Chs 253-256, 166 verses)
2. The Vicakhnu-Gita (Ch 257, 13 verses)
3. The Cirakarika-Upakhyana (Ch 258, 75 verses)
4. The Satyavat-Dyumatsena-Samvada (Ch 259, 35 verses)
5. The Kapila-Go-Samvada (Chs 260-262, 145 verses)
6. The Kundadhara-Upakhyana (Ch 263, 55 verses)
7. The Uñcchavrtteh Puravrttam (Ch 264, 19 verses)

1. In the Tuladhara-Jajali-Samvada, we encounter Jajali, an ascetic brahmana who provides shelter in his hair for a growing family of birds. When they reach maturity he feels that dharma is attained, but he is informed that Tuladhara is still superior to him. At the meeting that takes place between them in the city of Benares, Tuladhara states that the lifestyle that causes either no harm at all or very little harm to other living beings is the highest manifestation of dharma: *adrohenaiva bhutanam alpa-drohena va punah: ya vrttih sa paro dharmah* (12.254.6). One should not fear anything or ever be a cause of fear and never cause harm with thought, word or deed (254.16-17). Tuladhara then criticises the cruel practices current in human society, including the use of animals in agriculture, eating flesh, using human beings as slaves, selling meat, capturing wild animals to use as beasts of burden, ploughing the earth and killing the cow (254.37-48). Jajali argues that both animal husbandry and sacrifice are essential for the prosperity of human society but Tuladhara dismisses his case on both counts. The passage ends with Tuladhara asserting that ritual acts are not essential, for faith and renunciation are the most important elements in religious life.

2. The short Vicakhnu-Gita is a condemnation of the cruelty of animal sacrifice on the basis that non-violence is supreme amongst all forms of dharma: *ahimsaiva hi sarvebhyo dharmebhyo jyayasi mata*.

3. The placing of the Cirakarika-Upakhyana in this section seems not entirely appropriate, for the main idea behind this passage is the view that one should act cautiously and only after due consideration. It seems that the redactor was unsure where he should locate this piece and included it



here either because it is an act of violence that Cirakarika is cautious of performing or else because it is difficult to determine which course of action is in accordance with dharma.

4. The Satyavat-Dyumatsena-Samvada confronts another aspect of the question of non-violence, the execution of convicted criminals. Seeing a group criminals being taken for execution, Satyavat addresses his father King Dyumatsena, speaking out against this practice (both of these characters are better known from the story of Savitri narrated in the Vana-parvan). This treatise, however, does not appear to share Satyavat's view, concluding that criminals must be executed but only on the basis of compassion for the righteous citizens and never as a result of feelings of personal vindictiveness.

5. The Kapila-Go-Samvada is another passage that starts from a point of controversy over the performance of animal sacrifice. Here the main speaker is the famous teacher of Samkhya, Kapila, and his opponent is a brahmana named Syumarismi who has entered the body of the sacrificial cow in order to engage in this debate. Syumarismi defends the sacrifice of animals on the grounds that such rituals are prescribed by the Vedas. Therefore to condemn them is a sign of nastikya or not believing in the Vedic revelation. Kapila challenges Syumarismi by asking if he knows of any principle superior to ahimsa (260.17) and will not accept the words of the Vedas as sufficient to undermine this position. From this point the debate moves on to a more general consideration of how the path of renunciation and the pursuit of salvation can be regarded as compatible with the traditional teachings of the Vedas.

6. The Kundadhara-Upakhyana does not discuss the question of non-violence and its presence here serves as a warning against any attempt to identify any rigid structure in the Mokaa-dharma-parvan. In my opinion, the redactor has placed the treatise here because it follows logically from the end of the Kapila-Go-Samvada in seeking to show the superiority of transcendentalism over religious practices motivated by desire for material reward. It thus appears that the redactor does not seek just to combine passages in blocks according to one consistent theme, but is seeking out a logical sequence by which one unit may follow on from another.

7. The short Uñicchavrtteh Puravrttam deals again with the subject of animal sacrifice. Here we have an ascetic brahmana named Satya who lives on whatever he can gather. However, when the chance of sacrificing a deer arises he eventually succumbs to the temptation of gaining entry to heaven through performance of the ritual. We then learn that the deer was Dharma himself and the passage closes with the god giving his opinion that non-violence is the full expression of dharma, *ahimsa sakalo dharmah*, whilst sacrifice involving an act of violence is an incomplete form of dharma, *himsa yajñe 'samahita* (12.264.19).

In the Anugita we find the same subject revisited in Chapter 28 wherein a priest faces the criticism of a renunciant for attempting to offer a goat in sacrifice. Here it is asserted that the instruction of the ancient sages is that ahimsa is supreme amongst all forms of dharma, *ahimsa sarva-dharmanam iti vrddhanusasanam* (14.28.16). Chapter 29 recounts the story of Parasu-rama, with the conclusion that not harming others is the correct mode of conduct for a brahmana. Violence is a manifestation of Rajas (14.37.2) whilst ahimsa is a feature of Sattva (14.38.3) and ahimsa is the mark of dharma whilst violence is the mark of adharma, *ahimsa-laksano dharmo himsa cadharma-laksana*. No being fears a person who seeks moksa for he is devoted to the welfare of other beings and is always a friend to them (14.46.17-18). Because of his compassion he keeps his eyes to the ground whenever he walks (14.46.33), he adheres to the principle of ahimsa (35), he never troubles others and he is never troubled by the conduct of others (39). Some adhere to ahimsa whilst others include violence in their religious practice (14.48.21), but ahimsa is confirmed as the highest dharma:

*ahimsa sarva-bhutanam etat krtyatamam matam*

*etat padam anudvignam varistham dharma-laksanam*

Not harming any living being is understood to be the highest mode of action. Such practice represents the topmost state of existence, which is beyond fear and is the true indication of dharma. (14.49.2)

Having established where the subject of non-violence is addressed in Moksa-dharma and the Anugita, I wish now to look in more detail at the reasons why this subject is seen as significant and the various perspectives



the texts bring to bear upon it. For this purpose I propose to look at five aspects of non-violence that are considered in these passages: 1. Non-violence and renunciation. 2. Violence as a tool of state. 3. Violence as a part of Vedic ritual. 4. Consumption of flesh as food. 5. Violence as a moral issue.

**1. Non-violence and Renunciation.** For much of the Moksa-dharma and the Anugita it is a clear point of principle that in order to gain salvation the aspirant must utterly renounce the pleasures of worldly existence. Indeed, several of the passages, notably those at the very beginning of the Moksa-dharma, expound at length on the transience and lack of worth of such pleasures. Frequently we find statements to the effect that this mood of renunciation and world-indifference is to be accompanied by an attitude of non-violence. This is a part of the profile of the renounced sage. He has no more desires for material pleasure and hence he makes no endeavours in that direction. He wanders freely accepting whatever destiny bestows upon him. He neither laments nor rejoices and regards no one as either a friend or an enemy. His passions are fully under control and the forces of desire, greed and anger no longer dominate his mode of existence. There is a clear line of thought to show that one who has developed such a state of consciousness will never again engage in acts of violence, which are based on the very qualities he has renounced: desire, anger, competition, passion and enmity.

Hence, on innumerable occasions we find the quality of ahimsa included in the description of the characteristic demeanour of the sage who has renounced the world. A few examples selected from amongst many must suffice to give a flavour of these teachings: A son declares to his father, *so 'ham hy ahimsrah*, I will cause no injury (12.169.29); in his statement of renunciation, Manki says, *na himsisye ca himsatah*, 'Even when harmed by others I will inflict no harm' (12.171.43); Jaigisavya declares that the wise who have conquered anger and controlled their senses never harm anyone with thought, word or deed, *manasa karmana vaca naparadhyanti kasyacit* (12.222.12); Vyasa instructs his son Suka that a brahmana should make his living without harming any living being, *asamrodhena bhutanam vrttim lipseta vai dvijah* (12.227.3), that a Rsi living in the forest should never cause injury, *bhutanam avihimsakah* (12.234.7) and that the full purpose of dharma is contained in the principle

of not harming, *evam sarvam ahimsayam dharmartham apidhiyate* (12.237.19); and Narada recommends gentleness towards all beings, *mardavam sarva-bhutesu* (12.27617).

**2. Violence as a Tool of the State.** This issue is barely touched upon in the Moksa-dharma where the emphasis is consistently placed on renunciation of society rather continued existence within it. The ascetic tradition generally demands such renunciation as a prerequisite for the quest for moksa, although it seems likely that the representation of Yudhisthira as a ksatriya with pacifist tendencies is based on the experience of royalty falling under the influence of ascetic doctrines. Within the epic, this issue is debated mainly in the Udyoga-parvan, although not within the context of the imperative towards salvation. Such consideration is, however, fundamental to the teachings of the Bhagavad-gita, which concludes that violence is not a barrier to salvation provided it is motivated by duty rather than desire. Within the Moksa-dharma, the only time the question is considered is in the Satyavat-Dyumatsena-Samvada, which forms Chapter 259 of the Santi-parvan, and the conclusion arrived at here is very similar to that of the Bhagavad-gita. Although the passage opens with Satyavat's condemnation of the execution of criminals, the treatise does not seem to support his view. Dyumatsena explains that the innocent citizens cannot be protected without recourse to the death penalty and that the onset of Kali Yuga means that people are more prone to criminality than they were in the past. Hence executions are performed out of a sense of compassion for those who might otherwise be victims. Satyavat appears to accept this position, and follows the Gita's line of argument in urging that executions should be performed as a matter of duty, without any sense of personal malice (12.259.23).

**3. Violence as a Part of Vedic Ritual.** Whilst the Moksa-dharma is not particularly concerned with issues of kingship, the enactment of religious ritual looms large in the mind of the authors of its various passages. As noted earlier, these sections of the Mahabharata are products of the ascetic tradition, but are distinct from Buddhist or Jain ideas in that they do not seek a complete separation from the brahminical tradition. Hence a very real problem emerges in reconciling the Vedic ritual of

animal sacrifice with the ascetic emphasis on non-violence, and as we have seen much attention is devoted to the resolution of this problem.

For the authors of the different passages contained in the Mokṣadharmā, outright rejection of the Vedic ritual is not a viable option, for they are anxious to avoid the criticism of *nastikya*, a lack of faith in traditional religion. Indeed we find Jajali attacking Tuladhara on those very grounds, *nastikyam api jalpasi* (12.255.3), forcing him to defend the orthodoxy of the position he has taken, *nasmi brahmana nastikah*. And the defence of animal sacrifice offered by Syumarismi follows a similar line as he argues that such rituals are supported by the Vedas and are the only means by which one can gain entry into heaven in the afterlife (12.260.19,24). The opponents of violent acts reject these arguments on three distinct grounds: (i) Killing of animals in the *yajña* is a ritual for the *ksatriyas*, the warrior class who are by definition men of violence. (ii) Animal sacrifice is a modern innovation introduced for materialistic reasons. (iii) The offering made into the fire should be of plants or milk, and so no violence will occur in the ritual.

(i) This argument is made by Vyasa in the Sukanuprasna (Chs 224-247) and by Tuladhara in his debate with Jajali (Chs 253-256). According to Vyasa only the *ksatriya* ritual involves acts of violence, *arambhayajñah ksatrasya* (12.224.61, repeated in 230.12). Responding to Jajali's criticisms, Tuladhara asserts that he is not a critic of sacrifice per se, *na ca yajñam vinindami* (12.255.4), and he offers his respects to the *brahmana* ritual and those who have a proper knowledge of sacrifice. But now *brahmanas*, motivated by greed, have abandoned their proper duty and taken to performing the *ksatriya-yajña*, *sva-yajñam brahmana hitva ksatram yajñam ihasthitah* (12.255.5), being anxious to obtain rich rewards from the ruling class.

(ii) The claim that animal sacrifice is a modern innovation and not a true part of the tradition is also made Tuladhara who roundly condemns its introduction:

*lubdhair vitta-parair brahman nastikaih sampravartitam*

*veda-vadan avijñaya satyabhasam ivanrtam*

Not knowing the real teachings of the Veda, greedy non-believers who are anxious to procure wealth have introduced false ideas and presented them as the true version of the Vedas. (12.255.6)

It is interesting to note here how Tuladhara turns the accusation of *nastikya*, or heretical practice, back onto the ritualists who sacrifice animals, claiming that it is these acts of violence which represent a betrayal of Vedic orthodoxy. And the same point is made by King Vicakhnu in the following treatise. Observing the mutilated body of a bull and hearing the screams of the cows in the sacrificial arena, Vicakhnu rails against the cruelty of these rituals. In his view such acts are carried out only by those who transgress the proper rules, men who have no faith and are both fools and non-believers, *avyavasthita-maryadair vimudhair nastikair naraih samsayatmabhir* (12.257.4). The eating of meat that follows a sacrifice is never sanctioned by the Vedas, *naitad vedesu kalpitam* (12.257.9). Finally, we may note one of the ways in which the Vedas can be interpreted in different ways. In the Nara-Narayaniyam, we are told of a dispute between the gods and the Rsis over the offering that is to be made in the sacrifice. According to this passage, a difference of opinion arose over the word *aja*, which the Vedas use to indicate the appropriate offering. According to the gods *aja* means a goat, but the Rsis hold to the view that the term refers to seeds. The story narrated here in Chapter 324 centres on King Uparicara's false arbitration in the dispute, but it is made quite clear that the interpretation of *aja* given by the Rsis is the correct version.

(iii) The compromise solution recommended is that sacrifice should indeed be performed, but with plants and milk products rather than animals being offered as the oblation in the sacred fire. Tuladhara asserts that sacrifices are to be performed with plants, *osadhibhis tatha brahman yajerams te* (12.255.32) and lists trees, herbs, roots and fruits as suitable for this purpose (12.255.25). Vicakhnu argues that milk offerings are appropriate as the sacrifice is to be seen as an act of worship dedicated to Visnu (12.257.10). Refuting Syumarismi's insistence on the need for animal sacrifice, Kapila offers a list of rituals that can be performed without any act of violence: the new moon and full moon offerings, the Agni-hotra and the vows followed during the rainy season. The eternal *yajña* exists in these practices (12.261.19). In the Uñcchavrtteh

Puravrttam, it is stated quite clearly that acts of violence should not play any part in the sacrificial ritual, *tasmad dhimsa na yajñiya* (12.264.17). And finally, as we have noted above, in the dispute between the Rsis and the gods the true verdict is that the proper offering for a sacrifice is seeds rather than an animal.

**4. Consumption of Flesh as Food.** The principal eulogy of the vegetarian diet is offered by Bhisma in the Anusasana-parvan, but this point of view is confirmed by a number of references in the Moksa-dharma. Here two principles are involved, compassion as the basis for not slaughtering creatures and renunciation of the pleasure of eating flesh. This division is sometimes hard to detect in separate arguments but I think it is relevant as some passages do not absolutely forbid the eating of meat. It appears that in the arguments presented by Tuladhara and Vicakhu, neither of whom lives the life of an ascetic, compassion is the principal reason for insisting on a vegetarian diet. Tuladhara makes this demand as a part of his rejection of all forms of cruelty and includes the selling of meat in his list of calumnies (12.254.38, 41), whilst Vicakhu states that any form of dharma that includes eating meat cannot be respected, *vrtha mamsani khadanti naisa dharmah prasasyate* (12.257.8).

Elsewhere it seems that the path of renunciation demands abstention from flesh on the grounds of both asceticism and compassion, the exception being the Ajagara who accepts whatever destiny bestows upon him, including meat (12.172.21). It seems that brahmanas often ate the remnants of the sacrificial animals and the question of whether such food is acceptable again highlights the tension between traditional practices and the ascetic ideals. For those who are living as renunciants and forest dwellers it is clear that only a vegetarian diet is acceptable. Bhrgu asserts that the forest dwelling sage should live on herbs, roots, fruits and leaves (12.185.1), whilst Vyasa suggests a range of different ways that he may obtain food but does not include meat in any of them (12.236.7-13). Similar instructions are given by Bhisma in the Yoga-Kathanam (12.289.43-46) and by Surya in the Uñccha-Vrty-Upakhyana (12.351.2).

However, opinions vary over whether brahmanas living in society can eat the meat left over from sacrifices. In his teachings on righteous conduct, Bhisma argues that one who has given up meat eating must not consume even flesh that has been purified by being offered in sacrifice,

*yajusa samskrtam mamsam nivrto mamsa-bhaksanat na bhaksayed* (12.186.13), and he later reaffirms this view by stating that if brahmanas indulge in such food, their vows are broken (12.214.2)<sup>7</sup>. For householders, however, Vyasa seems to accept that it is lawful to eat meat provided the animal is killed in a proper ritual, *prani va yadi vaprani samskaram yajusarhati* (12.235.5). He later compares the remnants of sacrifice to the nectar of immortality and says that it should be eaten constantly, *vighasasi bhaven nityam nityam camrta-bhojanah* (12.235.11). Even Bhishma appears slightly equivocal on this subject, accepting that only eating meat from sacrifice is the same as abstaining from meat altogether (12.214.11), and the guru seems to hold a similar view in his instructions to his disciple (12.205.30). Hence, although the eating of meat is condemned by those teachings that stress compassion and where the injunctions are aimed at renunciants, there seems a reluctance to impose a complete proscription on all sections of society. Indeed at the end of the Vicakṣṇu-Gīta it appears that the redactor has added a slight emendation to dilute the rigour of the passage. Following Vicakṣṇu's strident condemnation of cruelty, Yudhishthira complains that total adherence to the principle of ahimsa might cause injury to the body and Bhishma concurs, agreeing that one should not follow religious duty to the extreme where it may damage one's health (12.257.12-13).

**5. Violence as a Moral Issue.** I have decided to include this final category in order to do justice the ethos of the Tuladhara-Jajali-Samvada and the Vicakṣṇu-Gīta. Both of these passages are concerned primarily with the issue of cruelty to animals, arguing that the exploitation of suffering creatures for the purpose of sacrifice or agriculture is unacceptable on moral grounds. The Vicakṣṇu-Gīta includes a graphic description of the acts of cruelty involved in animal sacrifice as the king first sees the mutilated torso of a bull in the sacred arena and then hears the pitiful lowing of the cows awaiting their slaughter there (12.257.2). Vicakṣṇu therefore condemns such actions and rules that cruelty can never form a part of religious ritual. Tuladhara has a similar understanding. Dharma means to cause no harm to others (12.254.6) and one should neither cause fear for other beings or cause harm with body, mind or words (16, 17). He condemns the abuse of animals for the purposes of agriculture, eating flesh, keeping human beings as slaves, selling meat to others, capturing wild animals to use as beasts of burden, slicing through



the earth with a sharp plough, and especially the slaughter of the cow, which should be seen as a mother figure (37-48). When Jajali argues that sacrifice and agriculture are essential for human existence, Tuladhara suggests that sacrifices should be performed properly without violence and the Earth will then produce food without being ploughed (12.255.12).

Although these passages can be seen as a part of the teachings on renunciation that are such a prominent theme of the Moksa-dharma, there is also a clear moral dimension to the ideals they propound that sets them somewhat apart. In its short exposition, the Vicakṣnu-Gita is concerned only to eliminate cruelty and violence from the sacrificial ritual. Similarly, despite occasional references to moksa, such as *brahma sampadyate tada* (12.254.17), Tuladhara's principal focus is on the proper demeanour and behaviour through which one should approach the world, and central to his vision is compassion and universal benevolence. It is this moral dimension that forms the main theme of his teachings and which impels him to demand renunciation of the various forms of cruel behaviour he deems to be unrighteous.

### **Ideals of Ahimsa in the Moksa-dharma and Anugita**

What is apparent from this brief review of the Moksa-dharma and the Anugita is that the perspectives they bring to bear on the subject of non-violence are significantly shaped by their wider orientation and anticipated audience. Most of these passages are aimed at renunciants, those individuals who have determined to abandon society and follow the ascetic path towards salvation from the cycle of rebirth, and where the question of non-violence is confronted, the discussion is generally set in this context. As a result there is no consideration of the morality of warfare, although this is a principal concern of Yudhisthira throughout the epic and of the teachings of the Bhagavad-gita. Rather the focus is on personal conduct and the appropriate attitude for a renunciant to adopt towards the world. Throughout the Moksa-dharma and Anugita, the importance of 'non-violence is repeatedly, though by no means universally, emphasised as a part of the ideal demeanour of the renounced sage who is in pursuit of salvation. He must transcend this world with all its dualities and become indifferent to the changing fortunes that inevitably beset one who exists here. He does not become angry if insulted or afflicted, and he has no sense of worldly competition; he develops a mood of universal

benevolence, regarding all other beings with kindness and compassion. It is quite apparent that this prescribed mood of renunciation is incompatible with acts of violence and hence for some of the writers ahimsa is highlighted as the very epitome of dharma.

As I have argued before in this piece, the various treatises reviewed here are a product of the ascetic milieu that developed in North India in various forms throughout the epic period. The manifestation of ascetic thought contained in the Mahabharata is one that seeks to maintain its links with the brahminical and Vedic orthodoxy. Whilst Buddhists, Jains and others rejected the authority of the Vedas, the passages here are utterly opposed to any such tendency. It is for this reason that so much of the discussion is devoted to ridding the sacrificial ritual of its violent and materialistic elements and thereby rendering it compatible with ascetic ideals. Whilst most of the teachings seem to be aimed at ascetics, there can be no doubt that the expansion of the ascetic traditions had a profound effect on the religious life of the Indian subcontinent and that these effects were not confined to the renunciants who sought spiritual goals outside the community. This popularisation of ascetic ideals is seen here most obviously in the Tuladhara-Jajali-Samvada and the short Vicakhnu-Gita. Here it is significant that the teachers are men who live in human society, Tuladhara as a merchant and Vicakhnu as a king, and have not adopted the renunciant lifestyle. I think these characters may be regarded as somewhat equivalent to Yudhisthira in the central narrative, as persons who have not accepted the ascetic lifestyle but are clear advocates of the ideals of the ascetic tradition. It seems apparent that such ideals spread far beyond the mendicant orders and that numerous persons who lived in society had accepted the new beliefs and values.

It is interesting to note the Vaisnava orientation of the Vicakhnu-Gita displayed in verses 10 and 11, which illustrates opposition to ritual violence from the theistic strand of the ascetic tradition, a form of opposition that is also displayed by the Nara-Narayaniyam. Chris Chapple<sup>8</sup> has suggested that the teachings of Tuladhara are influenced by Jain ideology and there are some indications that this might be the case.<sup>9</sup> Tuladhara's insistence on the status of brahmanas, the Vedas and sacrifice means that it cannot be regarded as a Jain work as such. Rather it reveals the way in which ideas from ascetic sects had entered and influenced more

orthodox strands of Indian thought in the epic period. In India today, ahimsa is widely regarded as a fundamental principle of Hindu dharma, with many Hindus following a vegetarian diet and M. K. Gandhi accepted as one of the greatest Hindu teachers of the modern era. In studying these passages of the Mahabharata, it may be that we are in contact with the process of transmission by which the ideal of ahimsa entered orthodox Hinduism along with many of the principal ideals originally embodied in the ascetic movement.

### Endnotes

1. Sutton, N. 'Asoka and Yudhisthira: A Historical Setting for the Ideological Tensions of the Mahabharata', in *Religion*, Vol 27 No 4, October 1997.

2. The structure of the Moksa-dharma-parvan was explored in some detail by John Brockington in, 'The Structure of the Moksadharmaparvan of the Mahabharata', in P. Balcerowicz and M. Mejer Ed, *On the Understanding of Other Cultures*, Warszawa, 2000, pp. 71-83.

3. Chapters 200 to 202, the Kesava-Mahatmyam, the Dik-Palaka-Kirtanam and the Visnoh Varaha-Rupam are placed together because of their focus on Visnu.

4. Although Bhishma does assert that Samkhya and Yoga share the common attribute of promoting compassion for all beings, *tayor yuktam daya bhutesu*, (12.289.9).

5. Brockington, *ibid*, p76.

6. Brockington confirms this view: 'A group of passages almost immediately thereafter may well have been placed together because of their common themes of *ahimsa* and veneration of the cow.' *Ibid*, p76.

7. As this is a passage spoken by Bhishma that is not a part of any of the treatises included in the Moksa-dharma, it may be that this is a section composed by the redactor and therefore reflecting his own views.

8. Chapple, C. 'Ahimsa in the Mahabharata: A Story a Philosophical Perspective and an Admonishment' in S. Rosen Ed, *Holy War: Violence and the Bhagavad Gita*, Hampton USA, 2002, p147.

9. Perhaps most significant here are the condemnation of the use of the plough (12.254.44) and the phrase *ksina-karman* (12.255.33) both of which provide evidence of Jain influence.