



A Comparative Study of Ahimsa in Buddhism and Gandhian Thought

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ABSTRACT

Ahimsa, often translated as "non-violence," is a core principle in several Indian religious and philosophical traditions. Although it is most commonly associated with Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism, Ahimsa took on new dimensions in the 20th century through Mahatma Gandhi's application in India's struggle for independence. In Buddhist philosophy, Ahimsa is an essential part of the path toward enlightenment, symbolizing compassion and the renunciation of harm in thought, word, and action. For Gandhi, Ahimsa was a powerful, socially active force for justice and liberation. This article explores Ahimsa as it appears in Buddhist and Gandhian thought, analyzing the philosophical foundations and practical applications within each tradition. In addition, the article will draw comparisons with Krishna's view of Ahimsa as described in the Bhagavad Gita and explore how the Buddhist goddess Maa Tara represents Ahimsa in her compassionate role.

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Introduction

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toward enlightenment, symbolizing compassion and the renunciation of harm in thought, word, and action. For Gandhi, Ahimsa was a powerful, socially active force for justice and liberation. This article explores Ahimsa as it appears in Buddhist and Gandhian thought, analyzing the philosophical foundations and practical applications within each tradition. In addition, the article will draw comparisons with Krishna's view of Ahimsa as described in the *Bhagavad Gita* and explore how the Buddhist goddess Maa Tara represents Ahimsa in her compassionate role.

1. The Concept of Ahimsa in Buddhism

In Buddhism, Ahimsa has its roots in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, who advocated a life of non-violence and compassion as the means to attain inner peace and enlightenment. Ahimsa in Buddhism is not only refraining from physical harm but also involves purity of thought, free from hatred, cruelty, or harmful intentions. This belief in compassion and harmlessness is integrated into the *Right Action* and *Right Thought* elements of the Noble Eightfold Path, the foundational guide to ethical conduct in Buddhism.

The *Dhammapada*, a revered Buddhist text, emphasizes the importance of treating all beings with empathy and kindness. It states, "All tremble at the rod, all fear death. Comparing others with oneself, one should neither kill nor cause others to kill." This passage reflects a deep reverence for life and empathy for others, showing how Buddhism views Ahimsa as integral to spiritual liberation.

Some scholars argue that early Buddhism primarily considered Ahimsa a personal ethic rather than a societal directive. Unlike Gandhi's approach, Buddhist Ahimsa rarely led to social reform movements, instead focusing on individual spiritual progress. However, in Mahayana Buddhism, Ahimsa expanded to encompass a more active compassion, advocating for the alleviation of suffering for all beings.

2. The Concept of Ahimsa in Gandhian Thought

Mahatma Gandhi revolutionized Ahimsa by expanding it from an individual virtue to a tool for social and political transformation. Inspired by Jainism, Christianity, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi framed Ahimsa as an assertive force that he famously called "the weapon of the strong." For Gandhi, Ahimsa was not passive; it demanded courage, self-sacrifice, and a willingness to suffer for the truth. In his seminal work *Hind Swaraj*, written in 1909, Gandhi



lays out his philosophy of non-violence as the path to true independence, or *Swaraj*. He writes, “Ahimsa is the highest duty, even if we cannot practice it in full, we must try to understand and respect it.” Gandhi believed that true non-violence meant loving even one’s oppressors and that through the power of love and moral persuasion, oppressive structures could be dismantled without bloodshed. Gandhi’s Ahimsa was unique in that it encouraged mass participation in social justice efforts, embodied in the philosophy of *Satyagraha*—“truth force” or “soul force.” Through non-violent resistance, Gandhi led Indians in civil disobedience against British colonial rule, demonstrating how Ahimsa could serve as a foundation for social and political activism. Critics, however, question the practicality and inclusivity of Gandhian Ahimsa. Figures such as B.R. Ambedkar argued that Gandhi’s approach sometimes reinforced existing social hierarchies, particularly the caste system, as Gandhi’s call for non-violent protest did not fully address structural violence against marginalized groups. Despite these critiques, Gandhian Ahimsa remains influential worldwide, inspiring leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela.

3. Comparative Analysis of Buddhist and Gandhian Ahimsa Similarities

Both Buddhist and Gandhian Ahimsa emphasize compassion, empathy, and self-restraint as central to ethical conduct. Each tradition promotes an inner transformation that aligns personal values with the principle of non-violence, underscoring the belief that a non-violent individual contributes to a non-violent world. Buddhist Ahimsa in meditation and mental discipline, and Gandhian Ahimsa in social activism, both strive to foster peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

Differences

1. **Philosophical Aim:** Buddhist Ahimsa is fundamentally a personal commitment focused on ending suffering and achieving enlightenment. In contrast, Gandhian Ahimsa has an activist dimension, aiming to bring about social and political reform.
2. **Scope:** While Buddhism treats Ahimsa as an individual journey, Gandhi extended it to a societal framework, seeking freedom from colonial rule and inspiring global movements.
3. **Approach to Conflict:** Gandhian Ahimsa includes strategic engagement in social conflict to provoke moral awakening, while Buddhist Ahimsa seeks to avoid conflict through inner peace and compassion.



4. Krishna's Concept of Ahimsa in the *Bhagavad Gita*

In Hinduism, Ahimsa is typically less absolute, accommodating complexities of Dharma, or duty. The *Bhagavad Gita*, for instance, presents a nuanced view of Ahimsa through the character of Krishna, who instructs the warrior Arjuna to fulfill his duty on the battlefield, even if it means participating in violence. Krishna's Ahimsa is conditional, suggesting that non-violence is context-dependent and subordinate to the moral imperative of Dharma. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna advocates for "detached action," performing one's duty without personal attachment. This concept differs from both Buddhist and Gandhian Ahimsa, which call for non-violence even in the face of injustice. Krishna's Ahimsa accepts that in some situations, violence may be necessary for justice, provided it is free from selfish motives, meaning, removing one's "Iness" and "Myness" from their karma. That becomes their *Karmayog*.

5. The Association of Buddhist Goddess Maa Tara with Ahimsa

Maa Tara, a revered goddess in Tibetan Buddhism, embodies the compassionate, protective aspect of Ahimsa. Known as a "mother of liberation," Tara vowed to reincarnate as a female bodhisattva to aid all beings. Her compassionate gaze and protective stance are symbols of a nurturing form of Ahimsa that does not merely abstain from harm but actively works to alleviate suffering. Tara's embodiment of Ahimsa suggests a proactive, maternal non-violence that mirrors Gandhian Ahimsa's commitment to social change. While Buddha's teachings focus on renouncing violence and cultivating personal peace, Tara's example shows Ahimsa as an engaged response to suffering, affirming the necessity of compassion that reaches out to others.

Conclusion

In Buddhism and Gandhian thought alike, Ahimsa is more than an ethical doctrine; it is a profound commitment to transforming oneself and, by extension, the world. Each tradition approaches this commitment uniquely: Buddhism sees Ahimsa as the renunciation of harm for personal enlightenment, while Gandhi envisioned it as an active moral force, striving to awaken compassion and justice in society. By anchoring his non-violence in truth (*Satya*) and soul force (*Satyagraha*), Gandhi expanded Ahimsa's influence beyond the individual, inspiring collective courage in the face of oppression and illustrating the liberating potential of moral strength. Likewise, Krishna's counsel to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* reveals another dimension of Ahimsa—one where duty and compassion coexist, allowing for action in service of the greater good. Meanwhile, Maa Tara, the



Buddhist goddess, serves as a compassionate embodiment of Ahimsa, showing how non-violence can be fierce, protective, and nurturing. Her compassion transcends personal peace, extending to the alleviation of suffering for all beings. Ultimately, Ahimsa in all its forms—from the meditative serenity of Buddhist thought to the courageous activism of Gandhi—encourages us to look beyond ourselves. It calls for a life of empathy, connection, and purposeful action, guided by a love for all creation. In a world often fraught with violence and division, the principle of Ahimsa offers an enduring pathway to reconciliation and harmony, urging us to embrace both inner and outer peace as a way to transform not only our own lives but the world around us.

Ahimsa, then, is not merely a philosophy or practice; it is a living testament to the transformative power of compassion and truth. In its deepest sense, it is the silent, resilient force that binds humanity, encouraging us to tread softly, speak kindly, and strive for justice in every action.

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