

TWO MAHATMAS: GANDHI AND THE BUDDHA

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Read portions of Gier's book *The Virtue of Non-Violence: from Gautama to Gandhi* (State University of New York Press, 2004) at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/vnv.htm.

*Gandhi is the greatest Indian since Gautama Buddha
and the greatest man since Jesus Christ.*

—J. H. Holmes

*I felt I was in the presence of a noble soul, a true disciple of Lord Buddha
and a true believer in peace and harmony among all men.*

—The Dalai Lama on meeting Gandhi

On the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's birthday on October 2, I would like to discuss his relationship to Buddhism. Writing to a Burmese friend in 1919, Gandhi said that "when I became acquainted with the teaching of the Buddha, my eyes were opened to the limitless possibilities of nonviolence." Gandhi believed that the Buddha was the greatest teacher of non-violence and said that the "Buddha taught us to defy appearances and trust in the final triumph of Truth and Love."

During November of 1927, Gandhi was on tour in Sri Lanka and it was natural that he would share his views on Buddhism. With remarkable candor Gandhi told his Buddhist audience that he was shocked that they could justify—as millions of East Asian Buddhists still do—eating the flesh of animals that they themselves had not killed.

Gandhi claimed that vegetarian Hindus were more consistent in their commitment to non-injury, and so they were now the true heirs of the Buddha's gospel of nonviolence. Reminding them of the Buddha's principle of interdependence of things, Gandhi told the Sri Lankans that any meat eater is causally linked to the violence of the one who butchers the animal.

Gandhi had a very clear understanding of the Buddhist concept of Nirvana: "Nirvana is utter extinction of all that is base in us, all that is vicious in us, all that is corrupt and corruptible in us. Nirvana is not like the black, dead peace of the grave, but the living peace, the living happiness of the soul."

This is a perfect response to perennial charges of Buddhist nihilism. Nirvana is, in a word, freedom—freedom not only from hate and greed, but freedom from craving, the unquenchable desire for those things that we can never attain. The Buddha made it clear that ordinary desires for food, shelter, and sexual relations (except for monks and nuns) are acceptable.

The goal of Buddhist ethics is to follow the Middle Way between austere asceticism, which the Buddha himself gave up after being misled by Hindu yogis, and unbridled sensualism at the other extreme. The Buddha believed that anyone, with the right concentration and discipline, could find her or his own Middle way, and that this is a form of religious humanism accessible to all people.

A typical Gandhian response to the misdeeds of others was to shame them by doing their penance for them. This proved to be very effective not only against the British but with his own family and followers as well. It is most intriguing to see how Gandhi imposed his own practice of “self-suffering” on the life of the Buddha. He wrongly believed that the Buddha did penance for the sins of corrupt Hindu priests, and that his goal was to force them to give up animal sacrifice, which they eventually did except for their popular goddess rituals.

Although not used by the Buddha or his immediate disciples, civil protest through acts of self-immolation was common in ancient as well as modern Asia. Buddhist monks burning themselves to death during the Vietnam War are the most dramatic examples. Gandhi was of course aware of this tradition of self-immolation, but he believed that his own particular adaptation of yogic self-suffering was new with him and that he was still perfecting its use. Presumably he would have seen protests through self-immolation as too passive as compared to the engaged and dynamic nature of his own political campaigns.

Some might say that the most significant difference between the Buddha and Gandhi was that the former was a world-denying ascetic and that the latter was a political activist with a strong spiritual bent. The following passage sums up this view:

Outwardly it would be hard to conceive of two individuals more different. On the one hand is the tranquil Buddha who walks serenely and calmly across the pages of history, or traditionally sits peacefully on a lotus with a gentle smile of infinitive compassion. On the other hand is the Mahatma, speed and energy in every movement, laughing and sorrowing in his ceaseless endeavor to help mankind with the problems of human life.

Gandhi must have heard similar comments, because he formulated this own firm response: “The Buddha fearlessly carried the war into the adversary’s camp and brought down on its knees an arrogant priesthood. The Buddha was for intensely direct action.”

Who is correct? The truth, as always, lies somewhere in between. Although he did frequently confront Hindu priests (the scriptures report that they were almost always converted), it can hardly be said that the Buddha destroyed the Hindu priesthood. It of course continues to have great power even today.

Even Gandhi admits that because of India’s own weaknesses, the Buddha’s message of

universal tolerance and nonviolence fell short even in the land of his birth. Gandhi is also making the Buddha more of a political activist than he ever was. Gandhi alone should take credit for his own brilliant synthesis of religion and political action.

The spiritual transformation of the entire world is the goal of most schools of Mahayana Buddhism. As opposed to the ascetic ideal of early Buddhism, where the emphasis was on personal liberation, the focus in Mahayana schools is on universal salvation. The vow of the Bodhisattva should be well known to those who know Buddhism: the Bodhisattva, even though she is free of karmic debt, vows not to enter Nirvana until all sentient beings enter before her. The Bodhisattva ideal and the comprehensive range of universal salvation makes it relevant to contemporary debates about animal rights and the protection of the environment.

Gandhi constantly emphasized that his focus was universal this-worldly salvation and not individual spiritual liberation: “I have no use for love and nonviolence as a means of individual liberation.” As with Latin American liberation theology, Gandhi’s theology maintained that God assumes a preferred option for the poor and the oppressed; indeed, Gandhi sometimes speaks of God existing in suffering humanity and not in Heaven: “God is found more often in the lowliest of His creatures than in the high and mighty.”

Does this, then, make Gandhi “the Bodhisattva of the twentieth century,” as Ramjee Singh has so boldly suggested? The answer of course is “No” for several reasons. On the face of it Gandhi’s self-suffering does appear to be similar to the Passion of the Bodhisattva. One such being was supposed to have said the following: “I resolve to abide in each single state of misfortune through numberless future ages for the salvation of all creatures. For the good of all creatures would experience their pain and unhappiness in my own body.”

Through his long and many fasts Gandhi did suffer greatly for the good of his countrymen. He also declared that in his next life he wanted to be reborn an untouchable. But this does not constitute the complete doctrine of salvation that we find in Buddhism and Christianity. Gandhi obviously did not claim to have taken away the sins of the world as Buddhist and Christians claim their saviors do.

Not even his most ardent followers have claimed that Gandhi had the redemptive powers of a savior. It must also be observed that Gandhi practiced self-suffering in order to change other people’s behavior, whereas the Passion of Christ and the Bodhisattva is conceived of as totally unconditional, expecting nothing in return for their grace and compassion.

In my book *The Virtue of Non-Violence* I argue that Buddhist humanism—a humanism of nonviolence and compassion—may be the very best way to take Gandhi’s philosophy into the 21st Century.

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