

16/02/2021

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC63Bx1fQYOkCEom93k4T2tg>

Nonviolence (Ahimsa) conversation with Siddhartha Interview conducted by Rajni Bakshi

Rajni Bakshi: What is your earliest memory of ahimsa in any form as an experience or as an ideal?

Siddhartha: Well, in college there was a lecturer, who was very inspiring. And he would say: "Above all we are human beings. It's our common humanity which is fundamental and most important". And he would go on to insist, we are first human beings, and only then are we Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs or Jains. Well, that stuck in my mind. Even to this day I think of this notion of 'our common humanity' every day.

Rajni Bakshi: How does this translate for you? As a grown-up how did this translate into the actions that you chose to undertake? And where did non-violence as an ideal and as a method fit into that?

Siddhartha: Well, I was also profoundly influenced by Gandhian notions. While Marxism initially grabbed my attention, I eventually found it too rational, too economy-centred, and lacking a spiritual sense. And I found that in Gandhi. I saw Gandhi as a point of departure, not as a point of arrival. We have to look at his significance in the modern world today, and this might mean a fair bit of re-thinking, without giving up on the basic spirit and orientation. The Buddha also profoundly influenced me.

I found the Buddha interesting because he states that there is no self. The self doesn't exist. And I would interpret that to mean that the self doesn't largely exist, that we are all conditioned and constructed beings, we - the accident of our birth often makes us what we are - Indian, American, Kenyan or Japanese, and so on. The accident of our birth gives us a religious identity, and the community we grow up in, - our parents' world view, the school we went to...all these factors condition us profoundly. In this sense we are all constructed beings. So, this self that is you is not real, it's all made up. It's so thoroughly conditioned that we can get upset if it is threatened or disparaged. We are not aware most of the time that the threatened and disparaged self is largely a construction, and that there is no need to get upset. If somebody says something obnoxious about me, or somebody from another religion says something disparaging about my religion I am kind of very profoundly impacted. Because this conditioning - which is not really me - gets affected. I am not aware that there is a me beyond this conditioning. The challenge is to sensitively deconstruct the self and simultaneously reconstruct in a fulfilling and compassionate manner.

I would add that to move towards genuine non-violence we will have to deconstruct the self both individually and collectively.

Rajni Bakshi: Ahimsa dharma is there very much in the ancient texts of India, but your work I think has been profoundly influenced by the Buddhist concept of non-violence. So could you say more about how that shaped your social and political activism both in India and through the global network?

Siddhartha: Yeah well, I think that you know meeting interesting people from different parts of the world, looking at interesting social transformation programs - again in different parts of the world - these have all influenced me. And I have also had a side of me - which is kind of literary - I have liked writing essays, poetry and fiction. I'm right now finishing a book of short stories. Perhaps, if you like, in this discussion I can bring in something imaginative... what I call parables.

Rajni Bakshi: Please.

Siddhartha: Let me begin with the first parable. I won't say it's very well-known, but it's known in some Buddhist and Hindu circles. It's called 'Indra's Net'. The god Indra has this net in the sky and it's a net which is wide and sparkling. Where the various threads of the net meet there's a brilliant diamond shining away. Each node of the net, where the threads meet, is a brilliant diamond. And there are these millions of diamonds ablaze with their light, quite extraordinary! One is stunned by the shine and sparkle of each particular diamond. But when one gets close to examine a diamond one is surprised to find that much of the sparkle and brilliance of the individual diamond is the reflection of the reflection of all the other diamonds. Only a little shine comes from the diamond itself. Without the reflection of all the other diamonds a particular diamond would be lustreless, with only a dull sparkle. So, Indra's Net underlines the significance of the Buddhist notion of interconnectedness and interdependence, that we are all interconnected with each other, that we receive and learn from each other. Not only that, we are also profoundly connected with the earth. After all, we emerged from the earth.

This interconnectedness with each other and the earth becomes even clearer when we examine our evolutionary history. Let me paraphrase Miriam MacGillis from Genesis Farm, New Jersey, who has attempted to summarise these evolutionary ideas: The universe came into being 15 billion years ago. First there was hydrogen, which was around only for about seven seconds. From the union of hydrogen atoms came helium. From helium came carbon. The process of differentiation continued. Our earth was formed about five billion years ago. This is a long long time ago. For purposes of elucidation let us say that 5 billion years equals 12 months. Then, in these twelve months of the earth's existence life appeared only in the last four months. From single celled organisms the process evolved and differentiated into more and more complex forms of life. Again, this took a long time. If the earth was born 12 months ago the human came into being only in the last day, in the last twenty-four hours! We know hardly anything about these twenty-four hours. Most of it is buried in a great tribal age where no detailed record exists. We only have some information on the last five thousand years or so- the period of the great civilisations. In the 24 hours that the human has been around our great civilisations are only 30 minutes old. And our modern scientific age is only about a couple of minutes old!

So in this 'one year' of the earth's life, it took eight months for the first single celled organism to emerge. And the human being emerged only 24 hours ago! So the human being is really so recent. Our great civilisations and religions emerged only half an hour ago. So the human being is twenty-three and a half hours older than all the gods we have. I'm not saying this to undervalue our religions or our gods. What I'm trying to say is that these are all cultural products, and when it comes to religions these cultural products would certainly be based on spiritual experiences.

I firmly believe that we all are spiritual beings. We are not just materialist and rational beings. There is a spiritual dimension in each of us, and this spiritual dimension takes particular forms in particular periods and particular cultures. But I must emphasise that our common humanity preceded all these forms. What I mean is that our common humanity preceded all our religions and our common spirituality preceded all our gods.

Rajni Bakshi: Was there another parable?

Siddhartha: Yes, there's a second parable. This parable is about frogs. There's this field with several wells. It's a bright hot day. All the wells have walls with frogs sitting on top of the wall.

Rajni Bakshi: Frogs!

Siddhartha: Yes frogs!

Some of the wells are saffron in colour, some green, some are white and a few blue. And there are frogs sitting on each of these walls. It's a very hot day and the heat is irritating the frogs considerably. The irritation from the heat is getting the frogs annoyed, and even angry. A frog on the green well is croaking: "My well is the best well! The water in my well is the purest". A few frogs from one of the saffron wells retort: "What nonsense! It's our well that has the best water. It's this well which is the purest!". Likewise, the frogs on the white wells and blue wells are also boasting about the water in their wells, how it is really the best.

As the heat mounted the frogs got tired with their croaking. Some of them decided to cool off by jumping into the waters of their respective wells. One by one they jumped into the waters. They began to swim deep into their wells, as the water was cooler there. Some of them found little cracks and passages deep inside where the water was even cooler. When they had cooled off after a while they decided to surface. The frogs who had entered into the passages in the walls found that when they surfaced they were in the wrong well. The frogs from the green well found that they had surfaced in the saffron well or white well. The frogs from the saffron well found they had surfaced in the green well, or blue well. To their utter consternation!

What had happened was that the frogs who entered the passages deep in their respective wells did not realise that the passages connected to other wells! So when they surfaced some frogs from the green well came up in the saffron well and some from the saffron well came up in the green well, and so on. Basically, these underground passages connected the waters in all the wells. On the top the wells looked separate, with distinct colours. But it was the same water. So what this parable states is that when you stay on the surface you notice the differences with each other, but when you go deep within yourself you discover your common humanity, you discover the common water.

Rajni Bakshi: But is our common humanity a sufficient basis to inculcate ahimsa, non-violence? Do you think this requires further orientation or is the implication of what you are saying that to know your common humanity is to realize that non-violence is our natural self? Or is non-violence a learned trait? What has been your experience on this?

Siddhartha: Well, I won't say that human beings are ontologically or intrinsically non-violent. I'd only say that the experience of sisterhood and brotherhood tells us that non-violence is a satisfying experience, a fulfilling experience. It doesn't drive you into a corner with anger and envy. Anger and envy are self-

defeating emotions. You're a lesser human being, rather unfinished, when you get into conflict with another. The experience of non-violence, be it non-violent communication, non-violent behaviour, non-violent solving of problems or non-violent political negotiations... show us that mutual respect and compassion are far better qualities than aggression and violence.

Siddhartha is the founder of Fireflies Ashram, near Bangalore. He is also a member of the international network known as Dialogues in Humanity.

Rajni Bakshi is a well-known Gandhian thinker and writer. She is the spirit behind Ahimsa Conversations.