# Watching, Dreaming, Waiting: Non-Violence, Social Change, and the Re-Imagining of Religion

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Since the invasion and occupation of Iraq, a welcome trio has appeared in Los Angeles, visible on public posters and placards, present at peace-rallies and protests. The triad's visages are of Mohandas 'Mahatma' Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet. The three appear together as the embodiment of the modern doctrine of non-violence, and underneath their pictures are inscribed their hopes - Gandhi: *Watching*, King: *Dreaming*, the Dalai Lama: *Waiting.*

As the War on Terror exacerbates the religious tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the world, this triad reminds us that religion does not have to be a cynical, atavistic, politically corrupt force. Religion itself is not inherently divisive, but rather it is the current interpretation and imagination of religion by the politically elite that creates religious animosity and mobilizes religious communities against each other. In this paper, I will argue that religion can be utilized as a powerful mechanism for inspiring social change and civil disobedience. I will demonstrate that the unique *interpretation* of religious text and tradition by these three figures provides concrete, effective paradigms of social change that have had profound implications for peace and justice activists. These leaders had the remarkable ability to translate and transform *theological* doctrines into *social* philosophies, and then implement that social change on a mass level. Through these three leaders, a Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist non-violent social ethic emerges, serving today as an indispensable escape from the rising religious extremism throughout the world.

This paper focuses on three men and their three theological texts - Gandhi's *Bhagavad Gita*, King's *New Testament*, and the Dalai Lama's *Bodhicaryavata*. With their unique interpretations of these respective scriptures, they argue for a universal ethic of social responsibility. All of these texts could be interpreted to justify violence, war, discrimination and aggression, but these three courageously embraced a hermeneutic of non-violence and a methodology of compassion.

## Gandhi's Gita

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), popularly considered to be the father of independent India, is the most famous global apostle of non-violence to date. Gandhi, like all Indian leaders struggling against British rule, sought to unify India and mobilize the masses against the British Raj. This was a particularly daunting task since India, as it existed, had only been defined as a unified entity once before - by the British themselves. The India that Gandhi attempted to unite was essentially a British construction, for never before had India maintained a singular, collective identity. Gandhi's goal was to propel India out of its colonial chains and into the realm of nationhood. But this idea of nation itself was a Western import, born from a lineage of sociopolitical thought informed by Western independence movements in countries such as the United States and France.


ISSN: 1522-211X | www.trinstitute.org/ojpcr/6_1soni.htm

Until the British came, the ideas of nation and independence had never before been articulated in India.

Thus, Gandhi found himself in the midst of a serious philosophical quandary. On the one hand, he needed to embrace the Western philosophical idea of sovereign nationhood. On the other hand, he needed to offer a uniquely Indian solution on how to unify and define India apart from its colonial conception. Accordingly, he needed to both accept and reject Western philosophical notions, he needed to both embrace and condemn British colonial constructions. It is in this way that Gandhi forged a path that would inspire non-violent activists for generations to come. Gandhi offered a social philosophy in the form of his *satyagraha* campaign.[1]

In order to comprehend Gandhi's formulation of *satyagraha*, it is necessary to first understand Indian philosophy in relation to Western philosophy and their respective histories and agendas. Indian philosophy has been primarily focused upon consciousness and perception and has historically attempted to explain the cycle of worldly existence and the path to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Western philosophy, on the other hand, was born out of a tradition that sought to evaluate society and ethics, and developed a lineage of sociopolitical thought, critiquing the roles of governance and establishing a framework from which to evaluate collective social welfare. Thus, it can be stated with some qualifications that historically, Indian philosophy has been more focused upon the individual's relationship with *enlightenment* while Western philosophy has been more focused upon the individual's relationship with *society*.

Gandhi attempted to establish a concrete social philosophy like that of the Western philosophical tradition. For Gandhi, liberation was not only the individual's spiritual liberation from the cycle of suffering, as Indian philosophy would assert, but also India's political liberation from the cycle of British imperialism. In order to make this argument, Gandhi relied upon India's most well known Hindu epic text, the *Bhagavad Gita.*[2] Gandhi recognized the efficacy in using a scriptural tradition as a catalyst for a freedom movement, and hailed the *Gita* as his preferential text, writing:

> If all other scriptures were reduced to ashes, the seven hundred verses of this imperishable booklet are quire enough to tell me what Hinduism is and how one can live up to it.[3]

Using an epic text to transmit social teachings was nothing new in India. Social morality and ethical prescriptions had long been delineated through an oral tradition of storytelling, inspired by works such as the *Panchatantra*, *Hitopedesha*, and *Kathasaritsagara*. But formulating an actual social philosophy, like Gandhi's *satyagraha*,

[1] Partha Chatterjee describes Gandhi's *satyagraha* campaign as a "legitimate, moral and truthful form of political action by the people against the injustices of the state, an active mass resistance to unjust rule." See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 103.

[2] The *Bhagavad Gita* is a chapter in the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*. In the *Gita*, Lord Krishna counsels Arjuna on the battlefield. Arjuna is reluctant to go to war against his cousins, but Krishna explains why he must, through a discourse on duty, knowledge and devotion.

[3] J.T.F. Jordens, "Gandhi and the Bhagavadgita," *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavad Gita*, ed. Robert Minor (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1986), 93.

with the specific aim of mobilizing the masses to act in a certain manner based upon the interpretation of an epic text - this was an entirely new endeavor.

As a Hindu, Gandhi had a deep emotional connection with the *Gita.* Ironically, the *Gita* was first introduced to him while he was living in England by one of his white Theosophist friends.[4] From that point on, the *Gita* became the single most influential text in Gandhi's life, during which he wrote more about it than any other single subject and started each morning with a reading and commentary from the text. Because of this strong personal relationship with the *Gita*, Gandhi was even more eager to use it as the fulcrum of his freedom movement. Such an intimate relationship is evidenced in Gandhi's own writing:

> I find a solace in the *Bhagavad Gita* that I miss even in the Sermon on the Mount. When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone I see not one ray of light, I go back to the *Bhagavad Gita*. I find a verse here and I find a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies - and my life has been full of external tragedies - and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*.[5]

Gandhi's relationship with the *Gita* affirms his own deeply Hindu religious heritage. Gandhi is lauded as an ecumenical leader in that he fought against religious and sexual discrimination. He often said that he was a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, and a Jew, and he often quoted from the different canonical traditions of world religions. However, this viewpoint belies Gandhi's Hindu orientation. Only a Hindu could claim to be a member of all religions, as Hinduism has historically enveloped and encompassed all traditions into its theological fold. Hindus often say "There are many paths up the mountain, but the destination remains the same," thereby giving validity to other religions in so much as they exist within a Hindu context.

Gandhi's Hindu ideology is further apparent in that Parahamsa Yogananda initiated him into a sect of Hindu practitioners of *kriya-yoga* in 1935.[6] Furthermore, although Gandhi worked tirelessly to uplift the conditions of Untouchables, he refused to speak out against the structurally Hindu social system of caste, putting him at odds with the low-caste leader Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar.[7] Nonetheless, even though he was such an ardent Hindu, he never became a Hindu fundamentalist or extremist[8], and through the *Gita*, Gandhi interpreted Hinduism as universalist and inclusivist:

> Hinduism is not an exclusive religion. In it there is room for the worship of all the prophets of the world. It is not a missionary religion in the

[4] Mohandas Gandhi, *The Bhagvadgita* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), 9.
[5] S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita* (Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 10.
[6] Parahamsa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Los Angeles: Self Realization Foundation Publications. 1987), 428.
[7] Ambedkar renamed the low-caste Untouchables as Dalits, meaning "oppressed" in Sanskrit. He denounced Hinduism's institutionalized and inhumane caste system, and led a mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism.
[8] Many Hindu extremists chastised Gandhi for his interfaith religiosity and support of Muslims. One such Hindu extremist, Nathuram Godse, assassinated Gandhi.

> ordinary sense of the term. It has no doubt absorbed many tribes in its fold, but this absorption has been of an evolutionary, imperceptible character.[9]

There are other strategic reasons why Gandhi chose the *Gita* as the catalyst for his freedom movement. The *Gita* has a profound history of reverence in India and has long established its scriptural authority. Many of India's greatest philosophers from all traditions and schools have written commentaries on the *Gita*. It was entirely appropriate then that Gandhi, in his desire to espouse a new social philosophy, follow in the footsteps of other Indian philosophical visionaries, such as Shankara, Ramanuja and Sri Aurobindo.

The *Gita* is also one of the few Indian texts that have a pan-Indian appeal. Many other popular Indian texts have regional variations and interpretations, culturally influenced by their respective histories and associated languages. It would be very difficult then to impart a monolithic philosophical teaching based on a text that exists differently in different areas for different people. As it was Gandhi's stated purpose to unify India, both in its freedom struggle and in its independence, he needed a text that was widely read and that existed in roughly the same format throughout the subcontinent. This naturally brought him to the *Gita*.

However, there were two philosophical problems with the *Gita*. First, the *Gita* is part of the Indian philosophical tradition concerned with the *individual's* enlightenment and release. Arjuna, as an *individual*, is confused about his own purpose and duty on the battlefield and Krishna is teaching only him. Somehow Gandhi needed to transform this epic dialogue from an *individual's* quest for spiritual liberation into a *nation's* quest for political liberation.

The second philosophical dilemma that Gandhi faced dealt with the substance of Krishna's advice. Arjuna is reluctant to go to battle because he does not want to kill his cousins. Krishna encourages him to stand up and fight, to spill the blood of his family on the battlefield. Gandhi's *Gita* interpretation stressed two qualities above all - love and non-violence. Both of these premises are facially negated by Krishna's advice to Arjuna. If India were to literally follow the *Gita*'s advice, a violent revolution and bloodshed amongst religious groups would be justifiable. Once again, Gandhi's agenda was exactly the opposite and this delicate situation would require of him a very creative reading of the *Gita*. Somehow he would have to take a text where Krishna convinces Arjuna to go kill his cousins, and read it in such a way as to inspire peace amongst kinsman and promote non-violence amongst revolutionaries.

In order to address the dilemma of transforming the *Gita* into a sociopolitical text for the nationalist movement, Gandhi opted for an allegorical reading rather than a literal one.[10] According to Gandhi, the battlefield represents the struggle of good against evil. This can be construed in an introspective manner for the individual, but can also exist as a social paradigm on the political stage. By employing such an allegorical translation of the *Gita*, Gandhi was able to establish the freedom movement as good and equate British rule with evil. Gandhi defended his use of an allegorical reading instead of a literal one, writing:

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[9] Yogananda, 429.
[10] Jordens, "Gandhi and the Bhagavadgita," 89.

> A literal interpretation lands one in a sea of contradictions. The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life.[11]

Because the battlefield is only a metaphor for the struggle against evil, there need not be violent connotations in the *Gita*.[12] Gandhi's allegorical commentary allowed him to downplay the prominent role of violence that is unavoidable in a literal reading, thereby empowering him to promote his own antithetical agenda of non-violence (*ahimsa*).[13] Accordingly, Gandhi did not subscribe to a literal reading of the *Gita* that traditionally had been interpreted to endorse Indian martial society:

> I do not deny that India had armies, warfare, etc., before she came in contact with Europe. But I do say that it was never the normal course of Indian life. The masses, unlike those of Europe, were untouched by the warlike spirits. I have already said in these pages I subscribe to the *Gita*, from which the writer has quoted a celebrated verse, a totally different meaning from that ordinarily given. I do not regard it as a description of, or an exhortation to, physical warfare.[14]

Gandhi's *satyagraha* campaign was based on principles that he interpreted as the *Gita*'s message, principles of non-violence, love, interconnectedness, duty and sacrifice, where self and other are intimately connected. Because Gandhi justified *satyagraha* through the *Gita*, a critical mass of Indians embraced his movement and emulated his actions. Through this creative act of interpretation, Gandhi successfully transformed the *Gita* into the catalyst and cornerstone of non-violent political action against British imperialism.

## Christ and King

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) became famous in the 1960s through his pivotal involvement in the American Civil Rights movement. His contribution to the methodology of social activism in both theory and practice is profound, and the effectiveness which he carried out his ideology is apparent in the success of his endeavors, such as the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott and the 1963 March on Washington.[15] His words and dreams inspired the world, and in 1964, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in helping transform the social conscience of the American people.[16]

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[11] Ibid., 95.

[12] Mohandas Gandhi, *Anasaktiyoga: the Gita According to Gandhi- The Gospel of Selfless Action* (San Francisco: Dry Bones Press, 1993), 3.

[13] Eric Sharpe, *The Universal Gita: Western Images of the Bhagavad Gita* (La Salle: Open Court Publishing Co., 1985), 118.

[14] Martin Green (ed.), *Gandhi In India: In His Own Words* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987), 72.

[15] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 58.

[16] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Testimony of Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 224.

King was brought up in a deeply religious environment, as both his father and grandfather were Baptist ministers. At the young age of 19, King was ordained as a minister in his father's congregation. His religiosity was furthered by his formal study of theology, as both an undergraduate and graduate student. In 1955, he received his doctorate from Boston University in the field of Systematic Theology, where his dissertation compared the theological arguments of Tillich and Weiman. King's message of non-violence and civil disobedience became rooted in his unique theological interpretation of the New Testament, and he used his moral authority as a minister in order to mobilize Christian communities throughout the United States.

King constructed his notion of social responsibility and morality based on the human relationship with God. According to King, because God created humans, they are all God's children.[17] Because they are all God's children, they are all united in a brotherhood/sisterhood that transcends culture, religion, and politics. God gives people free will, thus accounting for evil in the world, but ultimately one's relationship with God can be realized though one's relationship with others. Whatever injustice one does to another, one also does to God.

King focused on Matthew 5:35-43 as the authoritative testimony of God's will.[18] In this Biblical passage, Jesus taught that one should love one's enemies and turn one's cheek if hit. King maintained that following this advice is necessary for one's own survival, for one cannot love oneself if one is unable to love one's enemies.[19] One must love one's enemies for:

> Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. . . hate brings irreparable damage to its victims. We have seen its ugly consequences in the ignominious deaths brought to six million Jews by a hate-obsessed madman named Hitler, in the unspeakable violence inflicted upon Negroes. . . But there is another side which we must never overlook. Hate is as injurious to the person who hates.[20]

Here it is seen that King's conception of God necessitates interdependence and compassion. Examples of King's dedication to promoting the belief of interdependence are seen in the practical implementations of his social philosophy.[21] One such example is his critique of the separatist tenets of the Black Power movement. This movement focused on the fact that state sponsored white supremacy has oppressed black Americans for so long that white Americans could not possibly contribute positively to the civil rights agenda. Black Power proponents held white people as the problem, and therefore, they could not also be part of the solution. However, King refuted this argument, maintaining that there can be no salvation for the oppressed through isolation, only through cooperation and integration.[22] He believed social salvation was possible only

[17] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 72.
[18] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963), 34.
[19] King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, 34.
[20] King, *Strength to Love*, 37-8.
[21] King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 81.
[22] Ibid., 48.

through a proper understanding of God,[23] and such a realization illuminated the truth of interdependence, of not seeing self and other as distinct:

> In the final analysis, the white man cannot ignore the Negro's problem, because he is a part of the Negro, and the Negro is a part of him. The Negro's agony diminishes the white man, and the Negro's salvation enlarges the white man.[24]

Another example of King's deep conviction in the interdependence of all beings was his firm stance against the United States' involvement in Vietnam. Although some people criticized his validity as a domestic civil rights leader speaking on international politics,[25] King viewed himself not only as a citizen of the United States, but as a citizen of the world.[26] Accordingly, he had the moral responsibility to the global community to speak out and act against all injustice.[27] Interestingly enough, it was a letter from the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn (one of the most well known advocates of socially engaged Buddhism) that convinced King to speak out against the war, and subsequently, King nominated Thich Nhat Hahn for the Nobel Peace Prize. King's reasoning for the withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam was purely an ethical one; massive suffering existed because of the war, and it was the world's responsibility to alleviate that suffering:

> Somehow this madness must cease. We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as an American to the leaders of my own nation. The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop must be ours.[28]

In this passage, King's commitment to universal responsibility and social reform is clearly elucidated, as is his belief in interdependence. King also subscribed to the notion that compassion is of utmost importance for social change, for only through compassion will one be able to understand interdependence, only through compassion will one be able to love one's enemies and not see them as distinct from oneself:

> From time immemorial men have lived by the principle that 'self-preservation is the first law of life.' But this is a false assumption. I would say that other-preservation is the first law of life. It is the first law of life

[23] King, *Strength to Love*, 141.
[24] King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 101.
[25] Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 71.
[26] King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, 31.
[27] King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 91.
[28] King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, 25-31.

> precisely because we cannot preserve self without being concerned about preserving other selves. . . 'I' can not reach fulfillment without 'thou.' The self cannot be self without other selves. . . We are inevitably our brother's keeper because we are our brother's brother. Whatever affects one affects all indirectly.[29]

In this manner, King's conception of compassion demands not just having sympathy for others' suffering, but having the determination to eradicate suffering for all human beings. Compassion here becomes a *positive* attribute, a progressive attitude in which to interact with the world and a solid foundation on which to lay down methodological specifics. For King, compassion is instrumental for love, and love is "justice concretized."[30]

King based his social reform movement on the model of Mahatma Gandhi's *satyagraha* campaign[31] that helped India win independence from British rule in 1947. Although Gandhi was a Hindu, he also adopted unconditional universal love as the basis of his social movement. Accordingly, Gandhi embraced non-violent non-cooperation as the ultimate method of fighting oppression. Non-violence sought to end the cycle of hatred and destruction while non-cooperation sought to dismantle unjust colonial institutions. Gandhi argued that non-violent non-cooperation was not a passive manner of requesting social justice, but the most effective method of demanding it.[32] King wrote fondly of discovering Gandhi's social campaign based on the universal love:

> The whole Gandhian concept of *satyagraha* (*satya* is truth which equals love and *graha* is force: *satyagraha* thus means truth-force or love-force) was profoundly significant to me. . . As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. . . The intellectual and moral satisfaction that I failed to gain from the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, the revolutionary methods of Marx and Lenin, the social-tracts theory of Hobbes, the 'back to nature' optimism of Rousseau, and the superman philosophy of Nietzche, I found in the non-violent resistance philosophy of Gandhi.[33]

King based his civil rights campaign on Gandhi's historical precedent of *satyagraha*, adopting non-violent non-cooperation as the primary method of social activism. By doing this, he was able to incorporate his Christian beliefs into a pragmatic framework for social change. In this manner, King accomplished that which is difficult for social ethicists to do, namely outline a paradigm for social reform and implement the theoretical into a practical arena with moral authority and overwhelming success.

But it was King's religious roots that allowed him to articulate his social change, civil disobedience model. Through his theological study and interpretive analysis of the

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[29] King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 180-1.
[30] Ibid., 90.
[31] Hanes Walton, Jr., *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Microfilms International, 1967), 227.
[32] Walton, 201.
[33] Ibid., 227-8.

*New Testament*, King outlined a path of love and transformation, compassion and civil disobedience, where political and spiritual liberation were intimately and intricately interconnected. By doing so, King not only spearheaded the American Civil Rights movement, but he also inspired a generation of Christian non-violent activists throughout the world, arming them with love and light to combat the enveloping darkness and despair.

## A Modern Bodhisattva

In 1935, a boy was born in the northeastern Tibetan province of Amdo.[34] Before he was three years old, a search party guided by dreams, visions, and cloud formations identified him as the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet. In 1949, a newly emerging Maoist China occupied Tibet and forced its annexation during the Cultural Revolution. The young Dalai Lama was thrown into the midst of a political battle for his country. In 1959, with his life in danger, the Dalai Lama fled Tibet and took refuge in northern India. He has not yet returned to Tibet.

The Chinese occupation of Tibet is one of the great tragedies of our time, ignored until recently by the rest of the world. With over 1 million Tibetan deaths and over 6,000 Tibetan monasteries destroyed, the Chinese have essentially colonized Tibet and are now depleting it of its natural resources. The Chinese occupation of Tibet can only be characterized as genocide and ecocide.[35]

From Dharamsala, India, the town that houses the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, the Dalai Lama continues to serve as the spiritual figurehead of Tibetan Buddhism and the political head of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. As the spiritual figurehead of Tibetan Buddhism, he gives lectures on Buddhism, performs Buddhist ceremonies and initiations, leads Buddhist congregations, and provides spiritual guidance to Tibetan Buddhist practitioners everywhere. As the political head of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, the Dalai Lama performs functions that no previous Dalai Lama had had to perform. He is a head-of-state, traveling around the world meeting with political leaders, pleading the case of Tibet with them, mobilizing support for the people of Tibet, raising global awareness of the atrocities in Tibet while establishing monasteries, schools, hospitals, governmental institutions, and cultural centers for the hundreds of thousands of Tibetans that have made the perilous journey over the Himalayas to join him in exile. The Dalai Lama balances his overwhelming spiritual and political responsibilities by interpreting them to be no different from each other. The political and spiritual are interconnected and they inform each other.

For Tibetan Buddhists, the Dalai Lama is considered to be a *bodhisattva*, a liberator whose essence is perfected wisdom.[36] In order to understand the Buddhist ideal of the *bodhisattva*, it must be evaluated within a Buddhist philosophical context. In Buddhism, all phenomena are impermanent and human suffering is created by habitually

[34] Dalai Lama XIV, *Freedom In Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 3.
[35] Pico Iyer, "Tibet's Living Buddha," *A Policy of Kindness: An Anthology of Writings By and About the Dalai Lama*, ed. Sidney Pilburn (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1990), 28.
[36] Leslie Kawamura, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhism* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1981), 19.

subscribing to the erroneous conception of a permanent, immutable self. Impermanence in Buddhism is explained through the foundational philosophy of dependent origination (*pratityasumatapada*).[37] Dependent origination proposes that nothing arises from its own independent essence and that everything comes into existence through a set of causes and conditions.[38] These causes and conditions in turn are dependently originated from other causes and conditions, and there is no primordial cause or condition, for a singular initial cause would have to arise from its own intrinsic essence. Because everything is causally conditioned, everything must be impermanent.

Dependent origination is rooted in the paramount Buddhist concept of emptiness (*sunyata*). This tenet holds that all phenomena are empty of an independent essence, for if everything had an independent essence, there would be no way to interact with the world. Yet, clearly there are differences between objects, so some sort of referent point must exist. Buddhist philosophers proposed emptiness to be the *middle way* between absolutism and nihilism, between the two extreme views that everything ultimately exists and nothing ultimately exists. Emptiness is the middle way because it explains that phenomena do not ultimately exist by virtue of an inherent essence, but do conventionally exist in that they are recognizably different and dependently originated. Dependent origination necessitates interdependence, the notion that nothing is independent, that everything is related in some manner. The Dalai Lama illustrates the intricate relationship between emptiness and dependent origination:

> So what is emptiness? It is simply this unfindability. When we look for the flower among its parts, we are confronted by the absence of such a flower. That absence we are confronted with is the flower's emptiness. But then, is there no flower? Of course there is. To seek for the core of any phenomenon is ultimately to arrive at a more subtle appreciation of its emptiness, its unfindability. However, we mustn't think about the emptiness of a flower simply as the unfindability we encounter searching among its parts. Rather, it is the dependent nature of the flower, or whatever object you care to name, that defines its emptiness. This is called dependent origination.[39]

Based on the doctrine of emptiness, one cannot essentialize groups or people, but rather one must focus on common goals. Because nothing has an inherent essence of its own, people cannot be segregated by race, religion, sex, or ethnicity. Rather, they must be united by common goals, the most obvious being the freedom from suffering. Buddhism's social philosophy seeks to create a situation where people can achieve these common goals, and live life in peace and happiness.

The Dalai Lama interprets self-serving emotions to be the cause of human suffering, for to have these emotions, one must necessarily posit an inherent self and an

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[37] Richard Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History From Ancient Benares to Modern Columbo* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Inc., 1988), 62.
[38] Richard Robinson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1982), 239.
[39] Dalai Lama XIV, *An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 154.

essential object of desire. One cultivates the problematic mindset of seeing self and other as distinct, of dualistically constructing the world through concepts and language. Commenting on Shantideva's 8th century classic text *Bodhicaryavatara*, the Dalai Lama elucidates the *bodhisattva* non-dualistic ideal of seeing self and other as interchangeable:

> A *bodhisattva* should view himself or herself as the possession of other sentient beings. Just as phenomena in the natural world are there to be enjoyed and utilized by others, so must our own entire being and existence be available to them. It is only once we start thinking in such terms that we can develop the powerful thought that "I will dedicate my entire being for the benefit of others. I exist solely to be of service to them." Such powerful sentiments express themselves outwardly in acts that benefit sentient beings, and in the process our own needs are fulfilled. In contrast, if we live our entire lives motivated by selfishness, we ultimately cannot achieve our own self-centered aspirations, much less the well-being of others.[40]

In the *Bodhicaryavatara*, Shantideva describes the role of the *bodhisattva* as the one who puts off personal enlightenment in order to work for collective enlightenment. The *bodhisattva* is a spiritual teacher, helping others achieve spiritual liberation. This is best encapsulated the Shantideva passage the Dalai Lama most often quotes for its "great inspiration and determination."[41]

> For as long as space endures and for as long as the world lasts,
> May I live dispelling the miseries of the world.[42]

Thus, the *bodhisattva* is the one who has a realization of emptiness; since everything is interdependent and dependently originated, one cannot become enlightened without the whole world becoming enlightened as well. The *bodhisattva* ideal articulates one's spiritual responsibility towards society; because we are all interdependent, our actions have an effect on everything and everyone around us. The *bodhisattva* is explicitly concerned with the suffering of the rest of the world and not self-preservation or enlightenment.

According to the Dalai Lama, there can be only one true emotion that does not construct the world in a dualistic manner and is simultaneously grounded in the understanding of interdependence. This emotion is compassion (*karuna*).[43] *Karuna* refers to universal compassion for all sentient beings, not specific compassion for an object of preference or desire. Compassion here is a *positive trait*; it is more than just feeling the suffering of others, it is the commitment to alleviate that suffering.[44] As the Dalai Lama writes:

[40] Dalai Lama XIV, *An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life*, 178.
[41] Dalai Lama XIV, *Freedom In Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama*, 271.
[42] See chapter 10, verse 55 in B. Alan Wallace and Vesna Wallace, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1997), 144.
[43] Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press), 79.
[44] Robinson, 39.

> Our compassion for all sentient beings must stem from a recognition of their suffering. One thing very specific to the contemplation of suffering is that it tends to be more powerful and effective if we focus on our own suffering and then extend that recognition to the suffering of others. Our compassion for others grows as our recognition of their suffering does.[45]

The Dalai Lama often speaks in his traditional role as a spiritual teacher, helping others achieve enlightenment through spiritual guidance and textual exegesis. But the Dalai Lama has also reinterpreted the *bodhisattva* ideal based on his conflation of the spiritual and political. According to the Dalai Lama, the *bodhisattva* has the responsibility of helping others avoid suffering, *both spiritually and politically*, and therefore one's personal spiritual practice involves political action for collective peace and justice. This *bodhisattva* interpretation supports the bumper sticker activist claim that "No one is free while others are oppressed." In the Dalai Lama's acceptance address for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, he articulated the interconnectedness of people and the accompanying universal political responsibility:

> Thinking over what I might say today, I decided to share with you some of my thoughts concerning the common problems all of us face as members of the human family. Because we all share this small planet Earth, we have to learn to live in harmony and peace with each other and with nature. That is not just a dream, but a necessity. We are dependent on each other in so many ways that we can no longer live in isolated communities and ignore what is happening outside those communities. We need to help each other when have difficulties, and we must share the good fortune that we enjoy. I speak to you as just another human being, as a simple monk. If you find what I say useful, then I hope you will try to practice it.[46]

As far as the Tibetan struggle for genuine autonomy, under the Dalai Lama's leadership it has been a non-violent struggle using Gandhian techniques, such as protests, peaceful assembly, and fasting. With compassion as the catalyst, only non-violence is acceptable in an interconnected framework, for harming others entails harming oneself. The Dalai Lama interprets the Buddhist doctrine of interdependence as mandating that every person and community have a universal responsibility towards ensuring peace and prosperity for all sentient beings. Accordingly, the Dalai Lama has continually spoken out against violent insurrection and military campaigns, and seeks to demilitarize the Tibetan plateau to serve as a "zone of peace" between India and China. [47]

> We are at the dawn of an age in which extreme political concepts and dogmas may cease to dominate human affairs. We must use this historic opportunity to replace them by universal human and spiritual values and

[45] Dalai Lama XIV, *An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life*, 93.
[46] Dalai Lama XIV, "The Nobel Prize Lecture," *A Policy of Kindness: An Anthology of Writings By and About the Dalai Lama*, ed. Sidney Pilburn (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1990), 15-16.
[47] Ibid., 22.

> ensure these values become the fiber of the global community, which is emerging. It is our collective and universal responsibility to protect and nurture the global family, to support its weaker members and to preserve and tend to the environment in which we all live.[48]

The Dalai Lama's social ethic, based on his interpretation of the *bodhisattva* ideal, has inspired an international social change movement called *socially engaged Buddhism*. Other famous adherents of socially engaged Buddhism include the Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the 1991 Peace Prize, the Sri Lankan leader Dr. A.T. Aryaratne, founder of Sarvodya, the world's largest grassroots social change group, and the exiled Vietnamese leader Thich Nhat Hahn, head of the intentional meditation community of Plum Village, France. All over the world socially engaged Buddhist organizations are dealing with a range of social problems, such as HIV/AIDS and homelessness.[49] Books are being written in record numbers on the subject and many American universities have begun to offer classes on socially engaged Buddhism. By all accounts, it is still a young movement, adopting a specific methodology as it continues to evolve. But its foundations are solid and based upon fundamental ideas presented in Buddhist philosophy. This blueprint for social change is grounded in universal interdependence, universal responsibility, and universal compassion. Socially engaged Buddhism offers a powerful method of spiritual salvation through political service to others, with the belief that by liberating others, one also liberates oneself.

## Towards A Universal Ethic

The striking substantive similarities between Gandhi's *satyagraha*, King's social action model, and the Dalai Lama's socially engaged Buddhism cannot be ignored. They base their philosophies on the presumption that mankind has common underlying goals, namely the desire to be free from suffering. They hold the person who sacrifices self for others' happiness and enlightenment as demonstrating the highest virtue. They stress the importance of not differentiating between self and other as essential in ensuring a higher level of overall happiness in the world. They conflate spiritual and political liberation, preaching that one cannot occur at the exclusion of the other. Together, they form a Hindu-Christian-Buddhist interfaith ethic of universal inclusion, where all people have the right to live in peace and prosperity.

Are these respective religious models successful in bringing about social change? Many people have argued no. After all, it took Gandhi over 40 years to successfully rid India of British imperialism, and many give Hitler credit for finally destroying the British Empire, not Gandhi. King's social action did lead to certain tangible benefits for American blacks, but almost 40 years later, race relations in the United States are still in an abysmal state while institutionalized racism persists. And while the Dalai Lama has been actively campaigning in exile for over 40 years, the Chinese oppression of Tibetans and the world's apathy towards Tibet continues.

[48] Dalai Lama XIV, "Human Rights and Universal Responsibilities, "*A Policy of Kindness: An Anthology of Writings By and About the Dalai Lama*, 104-105.
[49] Fred Eppsteiner, *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), *preface x.*

Can violence achieve positive social change more efficiently than non-violence? There were certainly popular violent alternatives competing with these non-violent methods. Gandhi had to contend with the ideology of Subhash Chandra Bose, who advocated a violent insurrection against the British and organized the Indian National Army that attacked British India from Burma. King had to address Black Power and Nation of Islam sentiments that advocated violent resistance as a means of dealing with state sponsored white supremacy. And the Dalai Lama has to deal with many powerful Tibetan factions that preach that a violent uprising of Tibetan people is the only viable method to turn the international spotlight on the Tibetan struggle for autonomy.

Taking the perspective of the movements themselves though, it is clear that non-violence remains the only choice, and regardless of the amount of time it takes to achieve the political objective, violence cannot be justified. This is because within these social change models, the *process* is as important as the *result*. Because all three of these social reformers rely upon the fundamental idea of interconnectedness, violence is not only destructive to others, but it is self-destructive as well. Accordingly, any violent action, regardless of the outcome, is wholly destructive and *becomes* the very cycle of oppression and injustice it seeks to eliminate.

These leaders all built inclusive, interfaith religious coalitions, and reinterpreted traditional texts to promote a universal social ethic of civil disobedience based on love, compassion, non-violence, interconnectedness, and responsibility. Because they were all dedicated practitioners of their respective faiths (an initiate, a minister, a monk) they were able to establish a moral authority within a preexisting congregation and institutional framework. In doing so, they provide a powerful alternative to the current politicized, exclusivist models of religion propagated by religious extremists throughout the world.

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