

Reclaiming the Principle of Harmlessness

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Abstract

While there is agreement that harmlessness is a core spiritual principle, the implications for practice in everyday life are not as clear. This article explores what is meant by harmlessness, the gap between the conceptual commitment to harmlessness and the actual level of violence present in our world, and how positive harmlessness might be expressed in thought, word, and deed.

Introduction

All spiritual traditions, as well as professional codes of conduct, have a stated commitment to the principle of harmlessness. The concept and its coverage have evolved over the years, as has what we find acceptable in practice. But there is still a gap between the concept of harmlessness and its practice. So what does harmlessness really mean?

Meanings of Harmlessness

How we define harmlessness shapes what options we feel we have in terms of our behavior.

Innocuousness

While we may associate harmlessness with a spiritual discipline, there is another use of the term “harmless” that can be problematic.¹ We say, “He looks harmless,” meaning that he looks innocuous or naïve or gullible or inoffensive. We even find “harmless” equated in thesauruses with “weakness” in the sense of a lack of power or force. Is this how we view the spiritual concept of harmlessness – as a lack of potency or power?

When we reflect on harmlessness, we recognize that we need to be distinguishing between this rather insipid view of harmlessness and a more proactive concept. In the Ageless

Wisdom writings of Alice Bailey, the Tibetan warns us of this:

Let persons so live that their lives are harmless. Then no evil to the group can grow out of their thoughts, their actions, or their words. This is not negative harmlessness, but of a difficult and positive activity.²

Avoiding Harm or Violence

Moving beyond innocuousness, we have a dictionary definition of harmlessness as “causing no harm,”³ where harm is defined as hurt, damage, injury, wrong, or even evil. Note that this is a definition that tells us what *not* to do rather than what positive action to take.

This emphasis on harmlessness as an avoidance of harm is echoed in the Hippocratic Oath of doctors, “Above all, do no harm.” And in the *Wiccan Rede*, “An ye harm none, do what ye will.”⁴ In fact, the first commandment in the ancient Eastern teachings is harmlessness,⁵ or control of our relations to others. Actually, all of the major spiritual traditions point to harmlessness as a key value.

This meaning of harmlessness has come down to us from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism in the concept of *ahimsa*, or “without violence.” In Book II of the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, *ahimsa* is the first of the five “command-

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ments” or *yama* (discussed in Sutras 30-31), which is further expanded in the five rules or *niyama* in Sutra 32.⁶ Over the years, its interpretation has expanded in terms of what is included; however, it remains a concept defined by the absence, rather than the presence, of particular behavior.

The Ethics of Reciprocity

Most spiritual traditions address the concept of harmlessness through the related ethical concept of “reciprocity,” known to Christians as the Golden Rule: “Do to others what you would have them do to you.”⁷ Islam echoes the same sentiment: “None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.”⁸ Buddhism instructs adherents to “hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”⁹ Hindus are told: “This is the sum of duty: Do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.”¹⁰ Jews are admonished: “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. This is the law; all the rest is commentary.”¹¹ Sikhs are reminded: “Don’t create enmity with anyone as God is within everyone.”¹²

When we stop to think about these ethical mandates though, we realize that they are actually very self-focused. They leverage self-interest, and they come from more of an adolescent than an adult perspective. They start with what we want for ourselves, whether or not that is actually in our own best interest. In contrast, the Tibetan provides a less self-focused definition:

“Harmlessness... is the outstanding quality of every esoteric disciple... that speaks no word that can damage another person, that thinks no thought that could poison or produce misunderstanding, and that does no action that could hurt others.”¹³

Positive Harmlessness

It is in the Ageless Wisdom teachings that we begin to see a more proactive view of harmlessness. In the writings of Alice Bailey, the Tibetan cautions us that “...harmlessness in speech and also in thought and consequently in action... is a positive harmlessness, involving

constant activity and watchfulness; it is not a negative and fluidic tolerance.”¹⁴ So we have an initial working definition of harmlessness as involving a dynamic, proactive state of mind that results in right thought, right speech, and right action.

This emphasis on *positive* harmlessness is repeated by the Tibetan in *Esoteric Healing*:

The harmlessness to which I refer in connection with you is not negative, or sweet or kindly activity, as so many believe; it is a *state of mind* and one that in no way negates firm or even drastic action; it concerns motive and involves the determination that the motive behind all activity is goodwill. That motive might lead to positive and sometimes disagreeable action or speech, but as harmlessness and goodwill condition the mental approach, nothing can eventuate but good.¹⁵

And again in *A Treatise on White Magic*:

Positive harmlessness... works out in right thought (because based on intelligent love), right speech (because governed by self-control), and right action (because founded on an understanding of the Law)... It is not the harmlessness that comes from weakness and sentimental loving disposition, which dislikes trouble because it upsets the settled harmony of life and leads to consequent discomfort. It is not the harmlessness of the little evolved negative, impotent man or woman, who has not the power to hurt because possessing so little equipment wherewith damage can be done. It is the harmlessness that

springs from true understanding and control of the personality by the Soul, that leads inevitably to spiritual expression in every-day life. It emanates from a capacity to enter into the consciousness and to penetrate into the realization of others and, when this has been accomplished—all is forgiven and all is lost sight of in the desire to aid and to help.¹⁶

So we begin to get a clearer picture of positive harmlessness as being motivated by goodwill and involving firm action to prevent harm.

The Existence of Harmfulness

Even though we have centuries of religious emphasis on an ethics of reciprocity, unfortunately harmfulness is still ubiquitous. We kill millions in wars over religious differences and territorial greed, leaving millions more scarred for life. Illnesses caused by physicians through misdiagnosis or inappropriate treatment are the third leading cause of death in the U.S., after heart disease and cancer.¹⁷ Murders, assaults, sexual and domestic violence, and other examples of violence between humans are rampant, to say nothing of the mistreatment of animals, species extinction due to human initiatives, damage to the environment, and violence in movies and video games. The list seems endless.

In 2002, the World Health Organization (WHO) released the *World Report on Violence and Health*, covering a range of types of violence in addition to collective violence: child abuse and maltreatment, elder abuse, intimate partner violence, self-directed violence, sexual violence, and youth violence. WHO has pointed out that “the 20th century was one of the most violent periods in human history. An estimated 191 million people lost their lives directly or indirectly as a result of conflict, over half of whom were civilians.”¹⁸ Violence and related injuries account for over five million deaths annually, making it the third leading cause of death worldwide after coronary heart disease and stroke.¹⁹ Declaring violence as a leading worldwide public health problem, WHO launched a Global Campaign for Violence Prevention in 2003, which is still ongoing.²⁰

In 2006, the United Nations issued a 140-page report, “In-Depth Study of All Forms of Violence Against Women,” in which, for the first time, violence against women and girls was confirmed to be a human rights violation.²¹ The Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki Moon has identified violence against women and girls, in particular, as the most widespread human rights violation in the world and has launched the UNiTE campaign to end violence against women.²²

Why does harmfulness exist? How can we tolerate and even embrace this violence? What would induce us to change? Some say that we are born violent, that competition is at the root of survival. But scientists like Lynn Margulis have shown us that networking, not competition, is the fundamental survival strategy used from microbes on up.²³ Recent psychological research has verified that other primates are helpful, cooperative, and sensitive to unfair situations,²⁴ but we know from watching children that if one expects someone to be violent, one is much more likely to become violent.

Esoterically we understand the issue of harmfulness as one of cleavages or the illusion of separateness. It is easy to assume – incorrectly – that we are each separate individuals, unconnected to others except by emotional choice. This illusion allows us to believe that we can selectively apply the ethics of reciprocity and, further, that we can harm others without harming ourselves. In other words, we forget that, while we are each uniquely individual, we are fundamentally all part of the same cosmic energy field. In a very real sense, what we do to others, we are doing to ourselves. As a Pima Indian proverb confirms, “Do not wrong or hate your neighbor. For it is not they who you wrong, but yourself.”

Positive Harmlessness in Practice

We are on the threshold of a global shift in consciousness. How will we make choices about what we do or don't do, how we do it, and why? As we create the organizations, groups, and instruments that express the new ideas and values, the principle of harmlessness needs to be central to our process. So

let us examine together what a positive focus on harmlessness could mean for how we think, how we speak, and how we act.

Harmlessness in Thought

We tend to assume that our thoughts are private, but the Tibetan has reminded us that “all magical work is based upon the energy of thought and of the spoken word.”²⁵ And so we are charged esoterically with identifying and dispersing the glammers that infest our mental arena. The basic building blocks of our thoughts – which determine what we say and do – are our values, or attitudes and beliefs. So we have a responsibility to value the control of impulses, to observe or monitor our behavior, to weigh options and consequences before we act, and – perhaps most importantly – to screen out messages that tell us we are entitled to act harmfully.

Harmlessness in thought also involves the matter of intention. Quantum physics has now demonstrated that the energy field in which we exist is multi-potential—like a mist of possibilities—and that it is our observation, or intention, that literally precipitates the final selection and thus creates reality.²⁶

Thirdly, harmlessness in thought involves the type of focus we choose to maintain and the energetic imagery to which we expose ourselves. We are all aware of the increase in violence in TV, movies, and video games. Think for yourself how much violence you allow yourself to absorb in this manner. It is only in the past ten years, since Martin Seligman launched the focus on positive psychology when he became president of the American Psychological Association, that there has been a specific professional focus on the consequences of a positive, rather than a negative, focus. There is now a Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania as well as an International Positive Psychology Association. What is particularly relevant to us is the research showing that happiness and a positive attitude result in openness to new experiences and increased creativity, which confirms the Tibetan’s assertion that “joy is the strong basic note of our particular solar system.”²⁷

Harmlessness in Word

Sound in general, and language in particular, is very important in esoteric work. The Tibetan reminds us to “note how all inventions (which are neither more nor less than embodied concepts) come into exoteric being on the physical plane through the power of the spoken word.”²⁸ And then, in *Initiation Human and Solar*, he says:

Disciples who seek to enter within the Portals of Initiation cannot do so until they have learnt the power of speech and the power of silence...Every sound and every word spoken produces powerful results in matter of some kind.²⁹

He goes on to say:

In physical plane manifestation, we are known by our speech; we are known by our reticence, by the things we say, and by the things we leave unsaid, and are judged by the quality of our conversation...Through speech a thought is evoked and becomes present; it is brought out of abstraction and out of a nebulous condition and materialized upon the physical plane, producing (could we but see it) something very definite on etheric levels. Objective manifestation is produced, for ‘Things are that which the Word makes them in naming them.’ Speech is literally a great magical force.³⁰

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a great deal of research conducted by anthropologists and psychologists regarding the impact of language on how we view the world. As a result, we have become aware that inclusiveness needs to be grounded in inclusive or bias-free language.

One of the greatest challenges facing those engaged with esoteric literature is that many of the writings we rely on were drafted when gender-biased and anthropomorphic language was the norm. Any written material begins as an idea that is then expressed through the filters of the cultural context of that time. Examples of gender-biased language exist throughout the metaphysical literature, virtually all of which was written prior to the 1960s. The fol-

lowing are but a few of thousands of such references:

Alice A. Bailey, in *Esoteric Psychology II*: “Obedience to his [the disciple’s] own soul integrates him into the larger whole, wherein his own desires and urges are negated in the interest of the wider life of humanity, and of God Himself. God is the Great Server and expresses His divine life through the Love of His heart for humanity.”³¹

Ernest Holmes, in *The Science of Mind*: “Man re-enacts the Divine Nature on all three planes...He is the son within the Father.”³²

Helena Roerich, in *Illumination*: “They who deny God have not seen Him.”³³

It is interesting that several prominent writers have noted that gendered language was inaccurate and limiting, for example:

Helena Blavatsky, in *The Secret Doctrine*: “Therein Brahma is the cause of the potencies that are to be generated subsequently for the work of ‘creation.’ When a translator says, ‘And from him proceed the potencies to be created, after they had become the real cause’: ‘and from IT proceed the potencies that *will create* as they *become* the real cause’ (on the material plane) would perhaps be more correct?”³⁴

Holmes, in *The Science of Mind*: “There is something called God that makes things out of Himself (or Itself) by becoming the things It makes, according to law and order.”³⁵

However, gender-biased language continued to be used in their writings as that was accepted practice at the time. Students of the metaphysical literature need to exercise extreme care not to carry such bias, and the separativeness it reinforces, into contemporary speaking and writing.

A second example of the importance of the words we select is illustrated in a simple exercise. See if you feel the same if you say, “I’d like to join your committee, and I have some ideas about how to make it more inclusive,” or

if you say, “I’d like to join your committee, but it needs to be more inclusive.” Generally speaking, when we use “but,” we imply controversy and an adversarial position – which is harmful to group dynamics. We tend to become tense and to focus on how to justify our position or approach. When we use “and,” we imply an openness to alternatives and become more cooperative.

Finally, while words are important, so is silence – from two perspectives. On the one hand, there are times when it is *important* to remain silent. We have no right, for example, to criticize or direct others since we don’t know the life or Soul purpose of any other person or what their life journey has been to date. We also need to remain silent about our own spiritual work. On the other hand, there are situations where remaining silent condones harmful actions and it is important to speak out – for example, in protesting unjust wars or ecological degradation.

Harmlessness in Action

One of the key components of harmlessness in action is the ability to set limits and to eliminate outmoded structures and practices. This is tricky. We need to be careful not to equate harmlessness with being kind and friendly. Sometimes, as with speech, we need to act to prevent harm from occurring. For example, the Dalai Lama has indicated – in response to a question about whether killing another was ever justified – that sometimes we need to act in order to keep others from generating more negative karma.³⁶ Similarly, we know that a critical component of the ability to create is the ability to destroy or wipe away old forms – as is illustrated in the creative and destructive aspects of Ray One.

A second component of harmlessness in action is the process that we use. The new forms demand an inclusive, consultative process. We see this happening already in the engagement of vast numbers of ordinary people through social media such as Twitter and Facebook. During the last presidential campaign in the United States, Barack Obama’s use of information technology was an excellent example of how to include a wide range of voters. One of

the ways that we avoid being harmful is through the active engagement of others in determining what is in their best interest, instead of deciding for them. And we want to be sure to be working towards a positive goal rather than away from a negative one. Deepak Chopra's "Peace Is the Way" Global Community is an excellent example as it is consciously working towards peace rather than against war.

This brings us to what it is that our actions will create, what will be the result of our service. Here are three examples of institutional change that support the strengthening of harmlessness as a daily practice:

1. Education:
In British Columbia, Canada, experiments are moving forward regarding the inclusion of social responsibility and mindfulness in the school curriculum, starting at an early age. This is part of a focus on heart-mind education and strengthening mindful attention.³⁷ The Tibetan has provided a number of other content ideas in *Education in the New Age*.
2. Religion:
The United Religions Initiative provides a model for working together across different systems of spiritual belief. Using the method of appreciative inquiry, it stimulates curiosity about persons from different belief systems. The approach of appreciative inquiry is becoming so widespread that there was a conference in November 2009 called "World Appreciative Inquiry Conference: Creating a Positive Revolution for Sustainable Change."
3. Government:
There is already an international initiative to establish Departments of Peace. The challenge will be to have them replace Departments of Defence or Homeland Security rather than exist in parallel. Another idea is to replace Departments of Foreign Affairs or Immigration with Departments of Multinational Cooperation. And there are already proposals that governments could be operated with the participation of all citizens instead of needing to elect representatives.

In addition to the initiatives by WHO and the UN that have already been mentioned, there are also an increasing number of global peace initiatives that have been launched through civil society organizations.³⁸ One of them, which is inclusive of a number of the issues discussed in this article is the thirteenth annual 64-day "Gandhi King Chavez Season for Non-violence" that began at the end of January.³⁹

Conclusion

We are enjoined in the Ageless Wisdom to:

Practice harmlessness with zest and understanding for it is (if truly carried out) the destroyer of all limitation... Harmlessness is the expression of the life of those persons who realize themselves to be everywhere, who live consciously as a Soul, whose nature is love, whose method is inclusiveness, and to whom all forms are alike in that they veil and hide the light and are but externalizations of the one Infinite Being.... Harmlessness brings about in the life caution in judgment, reticence in speech, ability to refrain from impulsive action, and the demonstration of a non-critical spirit,...leading consequently to right action. Let harmlessness, therefore, be the keynote of your life.⁴⁰

This is a positive call to action, a challenge to practice harmlessness not only in what we avoid but also in what we do. If we reflect carefully on the teachings provided to us, we are called not only to live our lives in a manner that is harmless in thought, word, and deed, but also to act to end the violent practices still embedded in the fabric of our societies. Harmlessness is not weak or even an absence of harm. Positive harmlessness calls us to live the life of the Soul in all Its compassion and beneficence.

¹ See *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*: "not able or likely to cause harm."

² Alice A. Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology, Vol. 1* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1936), 301.

³ *Gage Canadian Dictionary*.

⁴ From *The Wiccan Rede*.

- 5 Alice A. Bailey, *From Intellect to Intuition* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1932), 222.
- 6 Alice A. Bailey, *The Light of the Soul* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1927), 184-190.
- 7 *Matthew* 7:12.
- 8 Number 13 of Imam “Al-Nawawi’s Forty Hadiths.”
- 9 *Udana-Varga* 5:18.
- 10 *Mahabharata* 5:1517.
- 11 *Talmud, Shabbat* 31a.
- 12 *Guru Arjan Devji* 259.
- 13 Alice A. Bailey, *The Externalisation of the Hierarchy* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1957), 20.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 490.
- 15 Alice A. Bailey, *Esoteric Healing* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1953), 670.
- 16 Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on White Magic* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1934), 317-318.
- 17 Ronald Grisanti, “Iatrogenic Disease: The 3rd Most Fatal Disease in the USA,” <http://www.yourmedicaldetective.com/public/335.cfm>.
- 18 See http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/violence/explaining/en/index.html.
- 19 See statistics at http://www.who.int/media_centre/factsheets/fs310/en/index.html and <http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/injuries/en/index.html>.
- 20 See http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/.
- 21 See <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/10/08/un-new-report-says-violence-against-women-human-rights-violation>.
- 22 See http://www.un.org/en/women/end_violence/.
- 23 Lynn Margulis, *The Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (London: Phoenix, 1998).
- 24 Sadie F. Dingfelder, “Nice by Nature?” *Monitor on Psychology* (Sept 2009, 58), 60-61.
- 25 Alice A. Bailey, *The Destiny of the Nations* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1949), 132.
- 26 See research detailed in Dorothy I. Riddle, *Enough for Us All, Volume I: Principles of Abundance for the Cosmic Citizen* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2010).
- 27 Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology, Vol. 1*, 49.
- 28 Bailey, *A Treatise on White Magic*, 476.
- 29 Alice A. Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1922), 198.
- 30 Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1925), 980-981.
- 31 Alice A. Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology, Vol. 2* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1942), 157-158.
- 32 Ernest Holmes, *The Science of Mind* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1938), 132.
- 33 Helena Roerich, *Leaves of Morya’s Garden, Book 2: Illumination* (New York: Agni Yoga Society, 1925), VI:12.
- 34 H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine I: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (Theosophical University Press, 1888), 55.
- 35 Holmes, *Science of Mind*, 84.
- 36 Response given by the Dalai Lama during a question and answer session after his talk on “Cultivating Happiness” during the *Vancouver Dialogues*, which the author attended in Vancouver, BC, Canada on September 9, 2006. Session summary available at <http://dalailamacentre.org/conference/session/cultivating-happiness>.
- 37 See references at http://www.canada.com/story_print.html?id=53fc1139-9c97-44ab-9667-e6f70a5092fc&sponsor= and http://www.thehawnfoundation.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2007/05/summary-of-the-effectiveness-of-the-me-program_april_2009ksrfinal1.pdf.
- 38 See a listing at <http://www.servicegrowth.net/index.php?cat=40>.
- 39 See http://www.agnt.org/snv2010/SNV_intro.htm.
- 40 Bailey, *Treatise on White Magic*, 102-103.