

Ahimsa for Arizona

Written by Shelley Lowther
Wednesday, 19 January 2011 09:57



With the tragedy in Arizona monopolizing the air waves, I've been thinking a lot about *ahimsa*. In yogic philosophy

ahimsa,

literally the avoidance of violence, is part of the Yamas, or restraints, that make up part of Ashtanga, or the eight-limbed path. It is a philosophy that will seem very familiar to Christians and Western society, even if you have never heard of it before in the sense of a yogic tradition.

In order to live in harmony, we must practice *ahimsa* towards all living things. *Ahimsa* implies non-killing, but in its comprehensive meaning, it means much more.

Ahimsa

means that we should not cause pain or harm to any living creature by thought, word or deed, and that we, as practitioners of humanity, should be of harmless mind, mouth and hand. In other words, through all of our thoughts and deeds, we should restrain from harming others, and do unto others as we would have done unto us.

Ahimsa is most often translated as non-killing and many yogis carry this to include animals, thus engaging in a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle. While this is the most widely accepted translation of this tenant of yoga, it is not the most important application of this principle. Many people would have a hard time giving up hamburgers, but they can practice ahimsa in more important and transformational ways.

Of course, when we look at ahimsa as this large, sweeping thing, it can be difficult to adopt its practice as a personal credo. We must look at ahimsa as a small step that we can take every day, and in every day situations, to elicit real, positive change. Even if we employ the principle of ahimsa just once a day, we will see changes in our relationships. Even if we start by practicing ahimsa towards ourselves, simply forgiving ourselves for perceived shortfalls, we can

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create positive change.

But ahimsa is more than non-injury or non-violence; it is positively love, and the development of an attitude and lifestyle where hatred and injury are replaced by love. Ahimsa is forgiveness, understanding, compassion and tolerance. Ahimsa IS yoga.

It is easy to over-simplify ahimsa in regards to the recent tragedy in Arizona, but the violence there punctuates the need for our society to reevaluate the manner in which we treat each other. If each of us took a moment in our daily lives to consider the implications of our actions, to take care not to cause harm to others through our actions, then our world would truly start to change. As Gandhi famously said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." Start with the simple step of ahimsa.

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