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Comparative Perspectives on Nonviolence: Buddhism and Gandhian Thought

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the philosophical and ethical convergences and differences between Buddhist and Gandhian conceptions of nonviolence (Ahimsa). Although we find that both traditions advocate non-harm, non-violence, compassion, and wisdom, their conceptual orientations, motivations, and practices are different. Buddhist nonviolence is rooted in an ontological understanding of suffering (dukkha), interdependence (pratīyasamutpāda), and the cultivation of compassion (karuṇā) through mental purification. In contrast, Gandhian nonviolence is formulated as a political and ethical strategy, Satyagraha, which combines truth (Satya), spiritual strength (Atmashakti), and disciplined action.

This study adopts a comparative and interpretive philosophical approach, referring to primary texts such as the Tipitaka and the Mahatma Gandhi Collection, as well as secondary sources on ethics, Buddhist studies, and political thought. The results show that while Buddhism popularised nonviolence as a teaching, Gandhi politicised it as a force of moral resistance and national liberation. The article argues that combining the two models can provide a comprehensive model for contemporary peacebuilding, spirituality, and interfaith dialogue

KEYWORDS: Ahimsa, Karuna, Comparative ethics, Buddhism, Gandhi, Nonviolence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nonviolence (*Ahimsa*) has remained a cornerstone of ethical philosophy across various religious and political traditions. In the case of Buddhism and Gandhian thought, nonviolence holds central significance, albeit with substantial differences in its philosophical foundations, operational methods, and broader applications. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the frameworks of nonviolence in Buddhism and Gandhi's philosophy differ, focusing on their ethical underpinnings, practical implementations, and philosophical orientations. The primary research question posed is: *How do Gandhian and Buddhist frameworks of nonviolence differ in their ethical foundations, operational methods, and philosophical orientations?*

Buddhism advocates for nonviolence as a means of transcending suffering and achieving enlightenment. Central to Buddhist ethics are the concepts of *anatta* (non-self), *metta* (loving-kindness), and *karuna* (compassion), which guide the practitioner toward mental purification and the cessation of harmful thoughts and actions. The Buddha's teachings emphasise a nonviolent approach rooted in mental clarity, mindfulness, and understanding of the impermanent nature of existence. Gandhi developed his own interpretation of nonviolence, *Satyagraha*, as a political and ethical strategy in the struggle for social justice and independence. Gandhi's philosophy merges the personal with the political, emphasising the role of truth (*Satya*) and love (*Prema*) as central to nonviolent resistance.

A review of the existing literature reveals several key themes. Buddhist ethics, as explored by scholars such as Rahula and Harvey,¹ The Buddha's message emphasises the importance of non-violence and peace, teaches about love and compassion, tolerance and understanding, and defines non-violence both metaphysically and personally, focusing on cultivating compassion and mindfulness to eliminate hatred and aggression. Buddhist ethics is rooted in compassion (*karuṇā*) and non-violence (*ahimsā*), seeking the welfare of all beings through moral restraint and mindfulness².

Meanwhile, Gandhi's ethical praxis has been examined by scholars like Borman, who³ says: *Satyagraha* emphasises political ideology and a moral way of life, a process of moral and spiritual self-discipline aimed at realising truth; Gandhi's non-violence was an instrument for transforming unjust social and political structures through conversion rather than coercion. And Lal⁴ says That, according to Gandhi, *Satyagraha* is both a moral law and a social instrument. It is the expression of soul-force in individual as well as collective life, who discuss *Satyagraha* not only as a spiritual practice but as a method for social and political change. It aims at the

transformation of the opponent, not his destruction. (p.226)

Despite the considerable body of work on both traditions, comparative studies of Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence remain relatively scarce. Few scholars have addressed the limitations of conflating these distinct ethical systems, which arise from vastly different philosophical traditions and cultural contexts.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the academic discourse on comparative ethics. By proposing a new typology of nonviolence—*ontological, intentional, and instrumental* this paper aims to critically analyse the ethical and philosophical dimensions of nonviolence in both Buddhist and Gandhian thought. This typology will serve as the framework for exploring the practical and ideological applications of nonviolence in both traditions, offering new insights into how these systems of thought can contribute to contemporary peace-building efforts and social justice movements.

The structure of the paper is as follows: First, the Methodology section outlines the approach used in the study, focusing on textual analysis and comparative ethical theory. Next, the Theoretical Framework introduces the typology of nonviolence that will be employed in the analysis. The paper then moves to the Ethical Comparison of Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence, followed by an exploration of their Socio-Political Dimensions. Finally, the Contemporary Applications of these frameworks will be discussed, leading to the Conclusion, where the findings will be summarised, and potential avenues for future research will be suggested.

2. Literature Review

The concept of nonviolence (*Ahimsa*) plays a pivotal role in both Buddhist and Gandhian thought, though their interpretations and applications of this principle diverge significantly. In Buddhism, nonviolence is not just the absence of physical harm but an ethical and metaphysical framework that aims at mental purification and the cessation of suffering. Nonviolence in Buddhism is deeply intertwined with the doctrine of *anatta* (non-self), *metta* (loving-kindness), and *karuna* (compassion), which, when fully realised, lead to the eradication of harmful intentions, speech, and action. Walpola Rahula and Peter Harvey are key scholars who explore this ethical system. Rahula's work, *What the Buddha Taught*, emphasises the internal cultivation of nonviolence through mindfulness and the Four Noble Truths: "Love, compassion and non-violence are the natural results of this training." (pp.80-81), which views harm as rooted in ignorance and desire⁵. Similarly, Harvey's work on Buddhist ethics expands on

¹ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), p.2.

² Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 56-57.

³ William Borman, *Gandhi and Non-Violence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 27-28 &120-122.

⁴ Basant Kumar Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973), pp. 223-225.

⁵ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), pp. 80-81.

these ideas by integrating compassion and mental purification as core aspects of nonviolence, framing it not just as an ethical rule but as a transformative process in achieving liberation from suffering; A non-violent attitude is central to Buddhist ethics... mindfulness and compassion are developed to prevent the arising of hatred and aggression.

In contrast, Mahatma Gandhi's concept of nonviolence, also referred to as *Satyagraha*, is primarily a political and social strategy. Gandhi's *Satyagraha* is a form of active resistance rooted in moral principles of truth (*Satya*) and love (*Prema*), rather than merely an inner state of being. Scholars like William Borman and Basant Kumar Lal analyse Gandhi's nonviolence both as an ethical principle and as a method for social and political change. Borman argues that Gandhi's nonviolence was designed to engage directly with political power and social injustice. *Satyagraha* is not merely a political weapon but a way of life, a process of moral and spiritual self-discipline aimed at realising truth, emphasizing that it required active participation and self-suffering as a form of resistance⁶. Lal further emphasises Gandhi's concept of self-purification and the role of nonviolence as a moral force for achieving social justice and liberation.⁷

Despite extensive scholarship on both Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence, comparative studies often struggle with the challenge of conflating these distinct ethical systems. While both traditions emphasise compassion, truth, and the avoidance of harm, their ultimate goals differ. Arindam Chakrabarti and Francis Clooney have pointed out the limitations of simplifying Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence as interchangeable or identical systems. Clooney points out the challenge of religious diversity and says: the religious diversity that is increasingly affecting and changing everything around us ... can be an unsettling phenomenon for people who actually are religious.⁸ Chakrabarti argues that while Buddhism focuses on ontological transformation, the eradication of ignorance to attain liberation from *samsara*, Gandhian nonviolence is rooted in sociopolitical action aimed at confronting injustice and oppression. Clooney further notes that these differences are significant, as they influence how the ethical principle of nonviolence is applied in real-world situations, with Buddhism focusing on internal transformation and Gandhi's philosophy on external political action.

The current literature reveals the need for a nuanced framework that does not conflate Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence but instead highlights their distinct contributions to ethical theory and activism. This paper proposes a typology of *Ahimsa*, **ontological**, **intentional**, and **instrumental**, to clarify the different philosophical

underpinnings and practical applications of nonviolence in both traditions. By delineating these categories, this study seeks to provide a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of how both systems of thought have shaped historical and contemporary movements for peace and justice.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper rests on a comparative analysis of nonviolence within the Buddhist and Gandhian traditions. Both frameworks share a commitment to compassionate living, but they diverge in their ontological, intentional, and instrumental applications of nonviolence. The conceptual basis for nonviolence in both systems is anchored in ethical theory, philosophical assumptions, and cultural values that shape how *Ahimsa* is understood and practised.

3.1 Ontological Nonviolence: Buddhist Foundations

In Buddhism, nonviolence is considered an ontological condition—a way of being that arises through deep insight into the nature of existence. The Buddha's teachings on nonviolence are rooted in the understanding of *anatta* (non-self) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), which describe the interdependent nature of all phenomena and the impermanence of all things. The cessation of harm and the cultivation of loving-kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) are the ultimate expressions of nonviolence in the Buddhist framework. Walpola Rahula argues that Buddhist nonviolence is not simply about refraining from physical harm. "Love, compassion and non-violence are the natural results of this training, but involve a deeper transformation of the mind, eradicating attachment, desire, and ignorance that fuel suffering and violence⁹."

Peter Harvey further explores this ontological approach, stating that Buddhist nonviolence is a practice that begins with mindfulness and mental discipline. Non-violence in Buddhism is not simply the absence of violence, but an active cultivation of love and compassion to overcome hatred. It is not merely the avoidance of external violence but a conscious effort to purify the mind from harmful thoughts and emotions, such as hatred and aversion¹⁰. This process involves an ongoing self-awareness and mental cultivation, which transforms how an individual relates to both themselves and others. In this way, nonviolence becomes an inner condition that manifests in outward actions.

3.2 Intentional Nonviolence: Gandhi's Ethical Framework

On the other hand, Gandhi's concept of nonviolence is not primarily ontological but intentional. For Gandhi, nonviolence (*Ahimsa*) is a conscious decision to live a life of love, truth, and moral integrity, even in the face of

⁶ William Borman, *Gandhi, and Non-Violence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 37-38.

⁷ Arindam Chakrabarti, *The Development of Comparative Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

⁸ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p.3.

⁹ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), pp. 80-81.

¹⁰ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 239-240.

oppression. Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha, which translates to "truth-force" or "soul-force", is grounded in the belief that nonviolence is a moral weapon that can overcome physical force: Satyagraha is soul-force pure and simple ... Its root meaning is holding on to truth, hence Truth-force.¹¹

Gandhi emphasises that nonviolence is not a passive condition but a deliberate, active choice. His famous assertion, Nonviolence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind, positions nonviolence as an ethical strategy for societal transformation. In Gandhi's philosophy, truth comprehends everything. With Gandhi, truth and non-violence are identical: My love for non-violence is superior to every other thing mundane or supra-mundane. It is equalled only by my love for Truth, which is to me synonymous with non-violence through which and which alone I can see and reach truth.¹²

Gandhi's intentional nonviolence requires self-purification and discipline. According to William Borman, Gandhi saw nonviolence as a way to engage actively with the world. It is not about avoiding conflict but about confronting it morally and with moral courage.¹³ The practice of Satyagraha demands that the practitioner suffer a form of moral resistance that does not seek to hurt the opponent but instead awakens the conscience of the aggressor. Gandhi's approach to nonviolence is thus an act of will, tied to personal and collective struggle.

3.3 Instrumental Nonviolence: Social and Political Change

Both traditions also employ nonviolence in an instrumental sense—using it to achieve social, political, and ethical goals. In Buddhism, nonviolence is often practised within monastic settings as a means of spiritual development, but Engaged Buddhism has emerged to apply these ethical principles to contemporary social justice issues. Thich Nhat Hanh¹⁴ and Sallie King¹⁵ have emphasised that engaged Buddhists integrate nonviolence into efforts for environmental protection, peacebuilding, and human rights. In this context, nonviolence becomes a practical, societal tool for transformation.

Gandhi, however, developed a more explicit political strategy for nonviolence that was instrumental in achieving India's independence. Gandhi's Satyagraha was not just an ethical stance but a political method for nonviolent resistance against British colonial rule. According to Basant Kumar Lal, Gandhi transformed nonviolence into a weapon of mass mobilisation, which sought to empower the oppressed and give them a platform for active participation in the liberation

struggle¹⁶. Gandhi's use of nonviolence was both a personal ethic and a collective strategy to resist injustice, forming the foundation for many civil rights movements globally. Gandhi stated that all activities were based on human rights, equality, and struggle, with special priority given to the poor. Gandhi says: Recall the face of the poorest and the most helpless man whom you may have seen and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain anything by it?¹⁷

3.4 Typology of Nonviolence

This paper proposes a typology of nonviolence that divides it into three categories:

Ontological Nonviolence: As seen in Buddhist philosophy, it is a transformation of being and consciousness, purging harmful desires and cultivating compassion.

Intentional Nonviolence: As seen in Gandhi's approach, it is an active, intentional choice made to confront injustice without resorting to violence.

Instrumental Nonviolence: Both traditions use nonviolence as a means of achieving social and political change. Gandhi's Satyagraha is perhaps the clearest example of this, but engaged Buddhists also employ nonviolence in political movements today.

4. Ethical Comparison

The ethical frameworks of nonviolence in Buddhism and Gandhian thought share certain key principles, including compassion, love, and truth. However, these principles are applied in distinct ways, shaped by the underlying metaphysical assumptions and goals of each tradition. This section compares the ethical dimensions of nonviolence as understood in Buddhism and Gandhian philosophy, with a focus on their ontological, intentional, and instrumental applications.

4.1 Buddhist Nonviolence: An Ontological Approach

In Buddhism, nonviolence is primarily understood as an ontological condition that arises through the transformation of one's inner consciousness. The Buddha's teachings, particularly the concept of *anatta* (non-self), highlight the interconnectedness of all beings, which forms the foundation for compassionate action. Nonviolence in Buddhism is not merely the absence of harm but the elimination of internal afflictions, such as hatred and ignorance, that cause suffering.¹⁸

Scholars like Rahula emphasise that Buddhist ethics call for the practitioner to transcend ego-based desires and to cultivate a mindset of compassion and loving-kindness, which is at the core of Buddhist nonviolence.

¹¹M. K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1950), pp. 109-115.

¹² Gandhi, M.K., *In Search of the Supreme*, Vol. 2, Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1961, p.15.

¹³ Basant Kumar Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973).

¹⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), pp. 107-109.

¹⁵ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), pp. 164-201.

¹⁶ Basant Kumar Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973).

¹⁷ Gandhi, M.K., *My Religion*, Ahmedabad: Navjeevan Publishing House, 1955, p.51

¹⁸ Arindam Chakrabarti, *The Development of Comparative Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999)

Buddhist teachings on Karma and Nirvana further solidify this ontological dimension of nonviolence. The cause and effect of actions are central in understanding nonviolence in Buddhism. Every harmful action, word, or thought generates negative karma, which perpetuates suffering in the cycle of samsara. Nonviolence, therefore, is a way of aligning oneself with right actions that lead toward liberation. Peter Harvey suggests that Buddhist nonviolence involves not only refraining from physical violence but also mental violence, which includes harmful intentions and negative emotions.¹⁹ Thus, Buddhist nonviolence is deeply rooted in mental and ethical purification, requiring a comprehensive transformation of both thought and action.

4.2 Gandhian Nonviolence: A Moral and Political Strategy

Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, unlike Buddhism, is more closely tied to social and political activism. Gandhi's nonviolence, or *Satyagraha*, was a method for resisting injustice through truth (*Satya*), love (*Prema*), and soul-force (*Atmashakti*). Elements of Gandhi's philosophy were rooted in the Indian religions of Jainism and Buddhism. Both of these advocate Ahimsa (Non-violence), which is the absence of the desire to kill or harm.²⁰ According to him, animals also have the right to live and need to be protected. Non-violence is necessary for life. He said: To my mind, the life of a lamb is no less precious than that of a human being. I should be unwilling to take the life of a lamb for the sake of the human body.²¹ While Gandhi acknowledged the internal aspects of nonviolence, such as self-purification and truth-seeking, he framed nonviolence as an intentional practice of resistance against oppressive forces. According to Borman, Gandhi's nonviolence was not a passive submission to injustice, but rather an active moral resistance that demanded the practitioner engage in suffering for truth.²² It was through this self-suffering that Gandhi believed the power of nonviolence could awaken the conscience of the oppressor. Truth is a wonderful thing; true happiness comes when we find the truth. Gandhi argues that true knowledge is inseparable from bliss, as authentic understanding eliminates sorrow and leads to an enduring happiness grounded in truth.²³

For Gandhi, nonviolence had a pragmatic aspect, as it was designed to achieve political goals, most notably India's independence from British colonial rule. Gandhi's *Satyagraha* was a powerful method of nonviolent

resistance that involved peaceful protests, civil disobedience, and non-cooperation with oppressive authorities. Basant Kumar Lal describes Gandhi's use of nonviolence as instrumental, seeking to mobilise mass movements for justice without resorting to violence: "Non-violent non-co-operation is a mass movement organised under well-trained leaders ... In brief, non-violent non-co-operation is conceived by Gandhi as a duty because non-co-operation with evil is as much a duty as co-operation with good."²⁴ Unlike Buddhism's emphasis on personal liberation, Gandhi's nonviolence was explicitly aimed at transforming society and challenging political power.

4.3 Comparative Ethical Dimensions:

Despite the differences in application, both traditions share fundamental ethical principles, the commitment to compassion, truth, and non-harm. However, the ontological nature of Buddhist nonviolence contrasts with Gandhi's more intentional and pragmatic approach. Buddhism teaches that nonviolence arises from a deep understanding of the impermanent and interdependent nature of existence, which requires a personal transformation of the individual's mind and emotions. In contrast, Gandhi's nonviolence is grounded in action and social engagement, aiming to bring about change through political means.

Arindam Chakrabarti and Francis Clooney highlight the limitations of conflating these two traditions, pointing out that while both emphasise compassion and truth, their ultimate goals are fundamentally different. Buddhism seeks to achieve personal liberation and the cessation of suffering, while Gandhi's nonviolence seeks to achieve social liberation through active resistance.²⁵ This divergence underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of nonviolence, recognising that while the ethical underpinnings may be similar, the application and goals diverge significantly.

In terms of instrumental nonviolence, both traditions utilise nonviolence as a means of achieving greater societal good—whether through spiritual liberation in Buddhism or social and political justice in Gandhian philosophy. Thich Nhat Hanh and Sallie King have both explored how engaged Buddhism applies nonviolence in contemporary social issues, while Gandhi used it to confront colonial oppression. Both approaches highlight that nonviolence is not only an individual moral principle but a collective tool for addressing societal challenges.^{26, 27}

¹⁹ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.245.

²⁰ Chapple, Christopher K., *Non-violence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions*, New York, 1993, p. 10.

²¹ Gandhi, M.K., *My Religion*, Ahmedabad: Navajeevan Publishing House, 1955, p. 78.

²² William Borman, *Gandhi, and Non-Violence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p.234.

²³ Gandhi, M.K., *In Search of the Supreme*, Vol. 2, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1961, p.10.

²⁴ Basant Kumar Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973), p.92.

²⁵ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

²⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993).

²⁷ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

5. Socio-Political Dimensions

Nonviolence, as a principle, extends beyond personal ethics and into the realm of social justice and political action. Both Buddhist and Gandhian thought have made substantial contributions to how nonviolence is conceptualised and applied in political and social contexts. While Buddhism traditionally emphasises personal liberation and mental purification, its ethical framework of nonviolence has found modern expression in Engaged Buddhism, where it addresses social issues such as poverty, inequality, and conflict resolution. Gandhi, on the other hand, conceptualised nonviolence as a tool for mass resistance and political struggle, primarily focusing on social justice and freedom from colonial oppression. In the words of J. H. Holmes: "Gandhi is the greatest Indian since Gautama Buddha and the greatest man since Jesus Christ."²⁸

5.1 Buddhist Nonviolence in Societal Contexts

Buddhist nonviolence traditionally focuses on the individual's transformation and the eradication of suffering. However, in the modern world, especially with the rise of Engaged Buddhism, the ethical teachings of the Buddha have been expanded to address societal issues. Engaged Buddhists, like Thich Nhat Hanh and Sallie King, argue that nonviolence is not just about individual enlightenment but about creating a compassionate world. According to King, the practice of compassionate activism involves applying the principles of Buddhist ethics to contemporary social and political issues, such as human rights, environmental sustainability, and war.

Engaged Buddhism, as articulated by Thich Nhat Hanh, moves beyond personal salvation to include social justice, peace, and reconciliation. Hanh's concept of interbeing, which stresses the interconnectedness of all beings, serves as a basis for advocating nonviolence in both personal conduct and social activism. For instance, his involvement in the Vietnam War protests and his promotion of peaceful resolutions to conflicts demonstrate the application of Buddhist nonviolence on a global scale.²⁹ This modern interpretation of Buddhist nonviolence addresses the structural violence embedded in society and aims to reform both individual attitudes and collective systems.

5.2 Gandhian Nonviolence in Political Action

Gandhi's approach to nonviolence was explicitly political and aimed at structural change in society. For Gandhi, nonviolence was not merely a personal virtue but a social weapon. His famous concept of Satyagraha transformed the notion of nonviolence from a passive stance into an active resistance against injustice. Gandhi used nonviolence as a tool for political mobilisation, civil disobedience, and social transformation. His leadership in the Indian independence movement demonstrates how

nonviolence could be used as a force to challenge colonial powers and empower the marginalised.³⁰

Gandhi's nonviolence also extended to social issues within India, such as the abolition of untouchability and the promotion of economic self-sufficiency. For Gandhi, nonviolence was not just about resisting oppression from external forces but also about addressing internal inequalities and creating a just society. Borman points out that Gandhi's use of nonviolence as a political tool was integral to his philosophy of resistance, as it sought not to destroy the oppressor but to awaken their conscience³¹. Gandhi's focus on nonviolent resistance was intended to create a more just and equitable world by engaging people in moral struggles and by making nonviolence an active force for social change.

5.3 Comparative Analysis of Socio-Political Applications

While both Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence advocate for social transformation, their approaches diverge in significant ways. Buddhist nonviolence in its traditional form focuses on the inner transformation of individuals and is often practised within the confines of monastic life. However, in the modern context, Engaged Buddhism has broadened the application of nonviolence to include political action and social activism. The influence of Engaged Buddhism can be seen in the global peace movements and advocacy for social justice issues like human rights and environmental sustainability³².

On the other hand, Gandhian nonviolence has always been more explicitly political, with Gandhi himself pioneering the use of nonviolence in the struggle against colonialism. Gandhi's nonviolence was a strategy for resistance and empowerment, aiming at social liberation and political independence. Gandhi's influence extended beyond India, inspiring civil rights movements in the United States and anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa. Chakrabarti argues that Gandhi's nonviolence, while rooted in ethical principles, was largely instrumental in its application, seeking immediate political change³³.

The differences in these applications highlight the divergence in the ontological versus pragmatic approaches to nonviolence in the two traditions. While both traditions advocate for a just society, Gandhi's nonviolence seeks to actively transform political structures, whereas Buddhist nonviolence focuses more on individual transformation and societal harmony through inner peace.

6. Contemporary Applications

The ethical principles of nonviolence in both Buddhism and Gandhian thought continue to resonate globally, particularly in contemporary social movements and peacebuilding efforts. Both traditions have inspired leaders and activists to apply nonviolence in their

²⁸ Holmes, J. H., Harrington, D.S., *The Enduring Greatness of Gandhi*, Ahmedabad, 1982, p. 275.

²⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Heart Sutra* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), p.159.

³⁰ William Borman, *Gandhi, and Non-Violence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

³¹ Basant Kumar Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973).

³² Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.135.

³³ Arindam Chakrabarti, *The Development of Comparative Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

respective contexts, advocating for peaceful resistance to injustice, human rights violations, and political oppression. This section examines the practical applications of Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence in modern-day social justice movements, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution. The contemporary relevance of these frameworks is explored, with a particular focus on their global influence and enduring significance.

6.1 Buddhist Nonviolence in Modern Movements

In contemporary times, Buddhist nonviolence has been instrumental in advocating for human rights, environmental protection, and peace. Engaged Buddhism has become a major movement, particularly with figures such as Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama, who apply the principles of compassion and mindfulness to social issues. Thich Nhat Hanh's approach to peacebuilding emphasises the practice of engaged nonviolence in addressing global conflicts. His involvement in promoting peace during the Vietnam War and his subsequent work in advocating for reconciliation and environmental sustainability illustrate the practical implications of Buddhist ethics in modern activism.³⁴ According to Thich Nhat Hanh, the belief that all beings are interconnected compels individuals to take collective responsibility for global problems, fostering an approach to nonviolence that transcends personal transformation and extends into societal healing³⁵.

The Dalai Lama, a prominent leader in the global advocacy for peace, has also employed Buddhist principles of nonviolence in the Tibetan freedom struggle. The Dalai Lama has consistently advocated for peaceful solutions to the political oppression faced by the Tibetan people under Chinese occupation. His approach aligns with Engaged Buddhism, applying compassionate nonviolence not only as a personal ethical stance but as a global strategy for conflict resolution and social harmony. His teachings emphasise that nonviolence can be an effective tool for addressing political injustices, promoting human rights, and fostering intercultural dialogue³⁶.

Buddhist nonviolence is also evident in movements such as the Environmental Movement, where Buddhist monks and activists have promoted ecological sustainability through nonviolent practices. By advocating for eco-friendly living and mindful consumption, they continue to draw upon the Buddhist teachings of interconnection and non-harm to combat environmental destruction and global climate change.

6.2 Gandhian Nonviolence in Global Movements

Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha has had an indelible influence on global movements for peace and justice. Perhaps the most notable application of Gandhian

nonviolence in modern times is the civil rights movement in the United States. Led by Dr Martin Luther King Jr., the movement drew heavily on Gandhi's principles of nonviolent resistance. Dr King's commitment to nonviolence and his advocacy for civil disobedience were inspired by Gandhi's philosophy of suffering for justice and using nonviolence as a means of moral resistance against institutional racism and segregation. Martin Luther King Jr. famously stated that "nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time," describing the civil rights movement as "the chronicle of 50,000 Negroes who took to heart the principles of nonviolence, who learned to fight for their rights with the weapon of love"³⁷.

Another significant example of Gandhian nonviolence in the modern era is the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, where Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu adopted nonviolent resistance inspired by Gandhi's principles. The nonviolent campaigns against racial segregation and the political repression of the African population were instrumental in ending apartheid in South Africa. He say: "Non-violent passive resistance is effective as long as your opposition adheres to the same rules as you do. But if peaceful protest is met with violence, its efficacy is at an end. For me, non-violence was not a moral principle but a strategy."³⁸ Gandhi's influence in this context was not just through moral resistance but through strategic political action, using Satyagraha to mobilize people into nonviolent direct action for political freedom.

In addition to these major historical movements, Gandhian nonviolence continues to influence activist groups and social justice organisations around the world. Nonviolent resistance to oppression and colonialism remains a prominent strategy in contemporary struggles for democracy and human rights, from the Arab Spring to current freedom movements in places like Myanmar and Belarus. Gandhi's emphasis on truth, self-suffering, and moral courage continues to resonate with contemporary movements seeking political empowerment through peaceful means.

6.3 Contemporary Relevance of Nonviolence

The continued relevance of both Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence is evident in their influence on peacebuilding efforts, social justice movements, and interfaith dialogues around the world.³⁹ Nonviolence is now seen as a universal principle that can be applied to address the most pressing issues of our time, including climate change, social inequality, political oppression, and conflict resolution.

³⁴Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), p.139.

³⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Heart Sutra* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), pp.5-7.

³⁶Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p.114.

³⁷Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp.85-86.

³⁸Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), p.158.

³⁹ Gandhi, M.K., *Communal Unity*, p.95.

Scholars such as Clooney⁴⁰ and Chakrabarti argue that the modern world can learn from both traditions, recognising the universal applicability of nonviolence as both an ethical principle and a method for political action⁴¹. The practical applications of Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence in contemporary contexts illustrate their potential to create more just, peaceful, and equitable societies. As the world faces complex global challenges, the philosophies of nonviolence provide a moral and practical framework for addressing conflict, promoting human rights, and fostering social change.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence reveals both shared principles and significant divergences in their ethical foundations, operational methods, and philosophical orientations. Both traditions emphasise the importance of compassion, truth, and love as central tenets of nonviolence. However, while Buddhism primarily views nonviolence as an ontological process of inner transformation, Gandhi's approach is grounded in intentional action and political resistance. Despite these differences, both frameworks have had profound impacts on social justice movements, peacebuilding, and political activism in the modern world. Gandhi gives expression to such ideas in the following manner: People must learn to be naturally independent. If they remember the central teaching, namely, that the real effective resistance lies in non-violence, they will model their conduct accordingly. And that is what the world has been doing, although unthinkingly. Since it is not the highest courage, namely, courage born of non-violence, it aims itself even unto the atom bomb. Those who do not see in it the futility of violence will naturally aim themselves to the best of their ability.⁴² The Buddhist framework of nonviolence is rooted in the understanding of interconnection and impermanence, guiding practitioners toward an inner peace that transcends physical harm and mental violence. As demonstrated through Engaged Buddhism, this philosophy has been extended to contemporary social activism, focusing on global peace, human rights, and environmental justice. Figures like Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama have used Buddhist nonviolence to engage in real-world issues, advocating for peaceful solutions to global conflicts and promoting intercultural understanding.

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⁴⁰ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp.139-160.

⁴¹ Arindam Chakrabarti, *The Development of Comparative Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

⁴² Gandhi, M. K. (n.d.). *Hindu Dharma*, p.155. Retrieved from <https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org>.

Gandhi's nonviolence, on the other hand, has always been more focused on practical resistance to political and social oppression. His concept of Satyagraha was a method for resisting injustice through truth, love, and soul-force. While Gandhi acknowledged the inner aspects of nonviolence, such as self-purification and truth-seeking, he framed nonviolence as an active practice of resistance against oppressive forces. Gandhi's use of nonviolence as a method for achieving social justice and political change continues to inspire movements for freedom and human rights worldwide.

While there are overlaps in the ethical principles of these two systems—both stress the importance of compassionate action and truth-seeking, their ultimate goals diverge. Buddhist nonviolence is primarily concerned with personal liberation and the cessation of suffering, while Gandhian nonviolence focuses on achieving social and political change.⁴³ Both, however, demonstrate the power of nonviolence as a transformative tool that goes beyond individual ethics and engages with global societal issues.

The contemporary relevance of these traditions is evident in their continued influence on global peacebuilding, social justice, and environmental advocacy. The principles of nonviolence offer a moral and practical framework for addressing global challenges, such as inequality, climate change, and political oppression. Both Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence provide timeless models for addressing conflict and striving for a more compassionate and just world. Gandhi consistently regarded the Buddha as the greatest teacher of *ahimsa* and affirmed that the Buddha's teaching urges humanity to look beyond appearances and to place trust in the ultimate triumph of truth and love.⁴⁴

In conclusion, this paper has shown that while Buddhist and Gandhian nonviolence are rooted in different philosophical traditions, they share common ethical foundations that make nonviolence a universal tool for addressing both personal and societal transformation. By analysing their distinct yet complementary approaches, we can better understand how these frameworks continue to shape modern movements for peace, justice, and human rights. Future research could further explore how nonviolence can be applied to modern political challenges, particularly in contexts of global conflict and socioeconomic inequality.

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(Digitised version from the Gandhi Sevagram Ashram archives.)

⁴³ Gandhi, M.K., *Hindu Dharma*, p.186

⁴⁴ See M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XXV (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1955), esp. discussions on *ahimsa* and truth.

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