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The conflicting themes of nonviolence and violence in ancient Indian asceticism as evident in the practice of fasting

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Abstract

In many ancient Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist texts, the path of the ascetic lifestyle involves an injunction to practice nonviolence, a requirement that conflicts with the violence that the ascetic inflicts upon him/herself by going naked, clothed in coarse garments made of discarded cloth, tree bark, or grass, excessive limits on food in-take, self-mutilation, sleep deprivation, and practicing various forms of extreme austerities in an effort to gain control over one's body, breathing rhythms, and mind. In spite of taking a vow of nonviolence, many Indian ascetics inflict painful harm upon their own bodies that represents a process of marking their bodies, which enables them to create their own bodies in particular ways that distinguish them from ordinary members of society by means of practicing their regimen of discipline. These bodily marks or characteristics make it easy for people within society to recognize their religious status outside of normal social intercourse and on the margins of Indian culture. A popular method of marking an ascetic's body is through extreme forms of fasting, a type of practice pushed to its most excessive extent by the vow to fast unto death by a Jain ascetic. Using fasting as an example of self-inflicted violence by the Indian ascetic, helps us to witness that violence and nonviolence are relative concepts because their degrees of social acceptability differ among religious cultures and even within particular religions. The relative nature of violence and nonviolence can also be traced to its acceptability during changing historical periods and circumstances. Even though violence and nonviolence are relative notions, violence signifies actions that injure, causes harm or pain, or destroys an object, animal, or person, whereas nonviolence is relative to other persons, animals, or things.

There is a popular assumption that ascetic figures are irenic and do not commit violence because their lifestyle and/or vows prohibit such action. But this false impression is contradicted by narratives about ascetics in a cross-cultural context. According to a narrative in the epic *Mahābhārata* (3.137.1-20) that reveals something about the relationship between the Indian ascetic and violence, the sage Yavakrita, who had performed austerities in order to master the Veda and had been warned about excessive pride by the god Indra, arrived at the heritage of the ascetic Raibhya, a friend of the sage's father. Spying the beautiful daughter-in-law of the ascetic, Yavakrita was overcome by passion and proposed a tryst with her. After the sexual encounter, the tearful and distraught daughter-in-law told her ascetic father-in-law what had occurred to her. Overcome by anger due to the injustice perpetrated against his daughter-in-law,

the irascible ascetic, Raibhya, plucked out two strands of hair from his head and consecutively placed them into the sacrificial fire, creating respectively a bewitching and beautiful woman to match his comely daughter-in-law and a fearsome, evil eyed Rākāsa, a demonic being, and ordered them to kill Yavakrita. The beautiful demon seduced the sage and stole his water bowl, which prevented him from purifying himself after having sex. Having become unclean and without a means to cleanse himself, the sage was vulnerable to a fatal attack from the demon, an encounter that ended when the sage's heart was split apart by a pike inflicted by the demon.

The narrative about Yavakrita is not an isolated tale because additional examples can be retrieved from the great epic and other sources. According to another epic narrative (Mbh. 1.36.8-19), while tracking a wounded deer on a hunting expedition in the forest, a king encountered an ascetic engaged in deep meditation. When the king asked the ascetic if he had seen a deer pass by him, the ascetic failed to respond to the king's question. The king did not know that this particular ascetic had taken a vow of silence, and became angry with the ascetic's lack of response. In order to demonstrate his displeasure with the ascetic, the king hung a dead snake around the neck of the meditating ascetic. Being perturbed by the king's intrusion into his solitude, breaking of his meditative concentration, and suffering an affront to his personal dignity due to the mindless action of the king, which was exemplified by the monarch hanging a snake around the ascetic's neck, the ascetic cursed king Pariksit to be hurled into the hell of Yama by the great snake Taksaka. In summary, the inhospitable act of the infuriated king receives a response from the offended ascetic that is intentionally violent as a recompense for the monarch's insensitivity to the ascetic's practice and disruption of his solitude.

These epic narratives are very instructive because they demonstrate the awesome powers that are achieved by some ascetics and also call attention to the close relationship between ascetic power and violence. The connection between violence and power in the life of the ascetic is not an apparition, but it is rather an essential component of his life-style despite an ascetic frequently taking a vow of nonviolence.³ When discussing *āsana* practice in classical yoga texts, such as the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā* composed by Svāmīrama in the 15th century and the later *Gheranda Samhitā* there are references to imitating animals, some of whom are benign while others are violent, such as the following: lion pose (*siṅghāsana*); eagle (*garudāsana*); cobra (*nāgāsana*); and scorpion (*vriścikāsana*). Chapple explains the rationale behind these poses, "By imitating an animal, one takes on a new demeanor, influenced by the qualities of the animal whose shape and form and stance one emulates." (Chapple 2008) For a path that stresses nonviolence, it is curious that yoga texts would adopt violent animals as paradigms to emulate. A possible explanation rests with the close relationship between asceticism and violence, but this observation does not negate the importance of adhering to a vow of nonviolence by the ascetic.

The interconnection between violence and nonviolence in the lifestyle of an ascetic is evident in the Upanisads with adoption of the practice of various forms of self sacrifice performed in a *symbolic* and *nonviolent* manner, using the *Purusamedha*, (human sacrifice) of a cosmic man into a variety of forms. The Upanisads texts exhibit, for instance, different forms of symbolic self-sacrifice: mental sacrifice (ChU 3.16.1-5; BU 1.2.7; JaU 4); offering of bodily parts (PainU 4.7; DMU 22-23); sacrifice of the breaths (ChU 5.19-23; Kaush 2.5; PrasU 4.3-4; MaitU2.6). The epic literature adds

the sacrifice of the senses (BhG 4.26-30) and the self (Mbh 12.23.6.23-24) to the list of examples.^b

Even though many ancient Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist texts contain an injunction to practice nonviolence, a requirement that conflicts with the violence that the ascetic inflicts upon him/herself by performing some form of symbolic interior sacrifice, going naked, being clothed in coarse garments made of discarded cloth, tree bark, or grass, self-imposing excessive limits on food in-take, self-mutilation, and sleep deprivation, and practicing various forms of extreme austerities in an effort to gain control over one's body, breathing rhythms, and mind. Thus the Indian ascetic tradition manifests a creative tension between a vow of nonviolence, which is often a prerequisite to adopting the lifestyle of an ascetic, and an ascetic regimen that inflicts violence on the practitioner. This tension is a continuation of the role of violence in the ancient Vedic sacrificial cult.^c Although nonviolence embodies the idea of security or safety in pre-Upanisadic texts, nonviolence did not play a major role in Vedism, and we are hard pressed to discover a genuine theory of nonviolence in the ritual context.

During the Vedic period, there is textual evidence suggesting a spirit of nonviolence as when the sacrificial victim is placed and killed outside of the sacred, sacrificial plot and its altars, when the sacrificer and priests turn away from the victim, when excuses are made for the victim's death, or when the victim is killed by strangulation or suffocation in order that it not utter a sound (Bodewitz 1999). It is also possible to witness a movement in the early Vedic period where there is little embarrassment concerning sacrificial violence and the later ritual texts and their manifestation of an uncomfortable increase of embarrassment about inflicting violence.^d This nascent movement toward nonviolence is opposed, for instance, by Kumārila in the *Mīmāṃsā Śloka-vārttika* because he "sees the universalization of the *ahimsā* doctrine as a threat to the Vedic dharma and the Aryan tradition (Halbfass 1991)." Nonetheless, the spirit of renunciation of the world and embrace of an ascetic lifestyle helped to spread an emphasis on nonviolence. But violence never ironically ceases because ascetics inflict violence upon themselves by means of their regimen and others by means of the powers, as illustrated by the two narratives introducing this essay, gained by ascetic practice. Moreover, Patrick Olivelle calls attention to the appropriation of royal vocabulary and symbols by ascetic movements in ancient India associated with war, conquest, violence, and royal authority with the intention of gaining power, prestige, influence, and religious authority (Olivelle 2006). Instead of the co-opting of political authority, this essay focuses on a very neglected and subtle aspect of ascetic violence that is self-inflicted by practicing extreme forms of fasting. Before concluding this essay, I consider some selected western theoretical perspectives on violence and nonviolence in order to place this discussion into a contemporary discussion of the topic.

The human body of the ascetic

If we consider the human body in a cross-cultural way, it is possible to make some general observations that go beyond the Indian context and inform us about essential features of the body that may or may not apply to Indian ascetics. It can be generally agreed that the ascetic follows their regimen of discipline in an embodied condition and often mutilates their body in the process and/or brings it under control. Therefore,

the human body is partially the locus of where the ascetic struggles physically and plays out the drama of liberation in which they are engaged. The ascetic often views their body as a hindrance and/or a vehicle that transports one through life with their body being a major obstacle to achieving their goal. But it is also in this embodied condition that the ascetic experiences unimaginable powers that suggest more of a divine being than a human being.

In the Indian cultural context, the human body is conceived as an entity in flux within the cycle of time and subject to the power of time that continually transforms a body from infancy to adulthood to death. Pāli Buddhist texts constantly refer to the impermanent nature of the body especially within the context of the chain of causation, forming the fourth link of the chain along with the mind that is also connected to ignorance. The popular *Dhammapada*, a postcanonical text, makes the impermanent nature of the body evident when it compares it to a mirage (4.46), a worthless piece of wood (3.41), a discarded pot (11.149), and a dilapidated chariot (11.151). In Buddhist and Hindu texts, the human body is often imagined as a vehicle that transports a person through life and at the end of a life a person, or more specifically immortal self/soul in Hinduism, karmic energy or consciousness as in Buddhism, is reborn into a new body (BhG 2: 26-29; *Dhammapada* 11.148). When embodied a person is able to act and perform various kinds of tasks that include work, walking, running, eating, sleeping, thinking, and various kinds of religious actions. When in an embodied condition a person encounters other embodied beings with whom a person can socially inter-react and communicate. These positive and pragmatic aspects of embodiment are balanced by what are considered polluting aspects of the body, such as urinating, defecating, spitting, crying, menstruation for women, and sexual intercourse for amorous partners. In addition to these examples of impurities, the human body discharges at its margins other secretions such as saliva, phlegm, tears, skin, and sweat. In Hinduism, these types of polluting substances and liquids entail necessary social precautions to avoid polluting others or being polluted oneself. This type of cultural scenario suggests that the human body is constantly under threat by the continual inflow and outflow of impurities. The disgusting and impure aspects of the human body are especially evident in Buddhist Pāli sources with references to the body as a boil, a bag of excrement, an open wound, a foul smelling heap of corruption, a charnel ground, or village sewage. The *Milindapanha* (26.1-42), a post canonical Buddhist text recounting the dialogue between a learned monk and king Milinda, recounts the thirty-two loathsome constituent parts of the human body that include things that grow at the margins of the body (e.g., hair, nails, skin), interior parts of the body (e.g., bones, internal organs), and disgusting by-products (e.g., feces, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, tears, saliva, snot, synovia, and urine).

The human body is something substantive, resilient, and fragile, which suggests that one can see and touch other bodies, execute arduous physical actions, and easily injure or destroy oneself or others. Humans attempt to protect their bodies by taking precautions to protect it by the following means: clothing it, washing it, feeding it, and giving it medicine when necessary to cure an illness. If these observations are germane to people within the world, they are not necessarily true of ascetic attitudes towards the body that tend to be more negative by emphasizing the filthy aspects of the body. In fact, the renowned Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa calls attention to the impurity of the

body from its conception in a female body, birth, nurturing, and eventually producing another impure body as an adult (Buddhaghosa 1964).

The human body, which is a product of a biological process of sexual intercourse, genetic heritage, and nurturing, is malleable because it can be trained to perform a plethora of actions. At the same time, a particular body is given to a person at birth and limits what a person can do to a large extent. The given nature of the body does not stop humans from attempting to modify it for a specific purpose such as military, athletic, religious, or cultural uses. Religious modification of the body includes practices, such as tonsure, circumcision, tattooing, scarring, fasting, celibacy, or flagellation, which are also related to the ascetic regimen of bodily control.

It is only as an embodied being that a person can emotionally submit to their sexual drive, causing a person to go to extreme lengths and sometimes committing bizarre acts to satisfy their desires. By transgressing social norms about satisfying one's desires, a person might feel shame or guilt about choices made and actions taken, or a person can attempt to control sexual urges by means of ascetic actions that can include ascetic practices, such as bodily control, a vow of celibacy, and/or meditation. It is common for a person to be aware that their body is a sensitive substance, which suggests a human body is also a complex of feelings and emotions, visible and tangible, and located in time and space. An embodied person can touch their body, touch other bodies, or be touched by other bodies, a feature of embodiment that possesses important implications for human sensations, such as smell, taste, hearing, and perception.

Besides all the actions that a body can perform within its location in time and space, the human body can become a sign or a symbol that often functions in a self-referential manner and as other-referential by means of its ability to give itself meaning. By becoming a symbol, a body can function as a bridge connecting nature and culture, or it can become an ambivalent entity. And as a symbol, the body can embody and reveal cultural values and attitudes. From the period of the ancient Vedic texts in India, the body functions as a symbol of a hierarchically ordered society (RV 10.90) with the head, or superior part of the body, representing the priestly caste and the lowest caste being represented by the feet. Thus, touching the feet of another person is indicative of one's inferior status in relation to the other. Likewise, striking someone with a shoe or sandal is an insult and a way of polluting another person.

In addition to its ability to function as a sign or symbol, the human body is simply flesh, an expression of its lustful nature that renders the body threatening and dangerous. This aspect of the body, a biologically given feature, calls for control and regulation by social processes with asceticism serving as an excellent example of this type of control. Social and cultural practices exerted upon the body are often intended to control and shape human bodies, behavior, and discourses associated with it. Although the body is biologically given to a person, it is additionally constructed by social and cultural discourse that define its shape, the way it behaves, and manner in which it interacts with other bodies. The way that social and cultural discourse operate informs us that the human body exceeds being a biological gift because it is something constructed by social and cultural forces. Even though the body is socially constructed, it continues to play a role in mental conceptualization.⁶ Over a period of time, the Indian ascetic's body shows signs of its own social construction because it is marked in a very distinctive manner that differentiates it from those following a more well recognize ordinary social

and family mode of existence associated with economic activities necessary for survival, whereas the ascetic's body forms the location of a creative relationship between power and knowledge.

Marking the body of the ascetic by fasting

After making a decision to adopt an ascetic way of life, ascetics engage in a process of marking their bodies in a variety of ways. In spite of taking a vow of nonviolence, many Indian ascetics use violent means to inflict painful harm upon their own bodies that represents a process of marking their bodies, which enables them to create their own bodies in particular ways that distinguish them from ordinary members of society by means of practicing their regimen of discipline. These bodily marks or characteristics make it easy for people within society to recognize an ascetic's religious status outside of normal social intercourse and on the margins of Indian culture. A popular method of marking an ascetic's body is through extreme forms of fasting, a type of practice pushed to its most excessive extent by the vow to fast unto death by a Jain ascetic.

Long periods of fasting result in emaciated looking bodies, for example, because of a lack of sufficient food to nourish the body with necessary proteins, vitamins, and other nutrients in order to maintain a healthy body, resulting in a loss of bodily fat and flesh. I am not referring to fasting as part of a yogic regimen practiced by ordinary people that does no visible harm to the body, but I am rather referring to extreme forms of fasting. Ascetics often appear with visible ribs, other perceptual bones showing, and a spinal cord protruding through their skin. As a result of various types of self-inflicted violence, the emaciated bodily appearance of ascetics gives an ascetic the look of an animated corpse. During a period of his life devoted to the practice of extreme forms of asceticism within the context of a conversation with Sāriputta preserved in the *Middle Length Sayings* (1.80-81), the historical Buddha describes his extreme practice of fasting when he followed a path of extreme asceticism trying to achieve liberation. He described his bodily condition in the following way: his limbs became knotted, his buttocks resembled a cow's hoof, his spinal cord was like a string of balls, his ribs became gaunt, his eyes sunk into his head, his scalp shriveled, he could touch the skin of his abdomen and grab his backbone, and the skin of his stomach clung to his spinal cord. He confessed that he subsisted on a single rice-grain as the reason for his body becoming so emaciated, which was a regimen that he subsequently rejected.

Instead of emphasizing extreme forms of fasting, the Buddha and his tradition stressed moderation when eating and adhering to rules of the monastic order. Buddhist texts stressed eating one meal a day around noon and no eating at night, although a monk or nun could eat again after sunrise. The Pāli texts called attention to the healthful benefits of this type of moderate eating pattern as well as its benefit of promoting strength, aging slower, and comfort.^f A monk was instructed to eat moderately for the support and maintenance of his body and not for amusement, intoxication, physical beauty, or attractiveness.^g This emphasis on moderate food consumption and its benefits are echoed by the great Buddhist thinker and commentator Buddhaghosa.^h

The importance of food consumption to the ascetic lifestyle is emphasized in India in classical Hindu texts that classify ascetics according to habits associated with eating. It is typical for texts to characterize ascetics according to begging habits, according to the

number of staffs that they carry, according to their type of begging bowl, or according to their method of eating. Certain ascetics (*kuticakas*) beg from children, others (*bahudakas*) beg from Brahmin families, some ascetics (*hamsas*) are like wandering birds by picking up food wherever they can find it, and other ascetics (*paramahamsas*) beg from all four castes without discrimination, according to the historically later *Āśrama Upanisad* (4). A further distinction is made by the *Bhikāuka Upanisad* (2-5) when it states that *kuticakas* live on eight mouthfuls of food, *bahudakas* subsist on eight mouthfuls from Brahmin sages, *hamsas* consume cow's urine and other products from the cow, reducing their daily consumption by a single mouthful each day after starting with fifteen mouthfuls. Finally, the *paramahamsas* live on eight mouthfuls of food. The *Naradapurivrajaka Upanisad* (5.12-17) also discusses the location of the food consumption: *kuticakas* eat in a single place, *bahudakas* eat like bees, *hamsas* eat food gathered from different locations, and *paramahamsas* beg from only five homes during an evening, using only their hands as begging bowls. Buddhist monks and nuns are encouraged to beg randomly, whereas Jain ascetics of the Śvetāmbara sect beg using small pots to collect food, and the Digambara Jain ascetics use their hands for the consumption of one meal a day.ⁱ

An extreme and strict regimen of fasting, a form of self-inflicted violence, leads to a phenomenon that characterizes the appearance of many ascetics: veins. It is lucidly affirmed in some texts that the ascetic's body is held together by his/her veins. Because of Jayadratha's extreme asceticism, for instance, his body is described as being held together by veins (Mbh 7.41.12), and the same thing is asserted of the ascetic Matanga (Mbh 13.30.2) later in the same epic. Referring to the former bodily condition of the venerable Buddhist monk Seyyasaka, his friends describe his appearance during his previous ascetic phase by stating "with veins showing all over your body".^j What this means is that veins appear all over the body of the ascetic, providing an outline of the body and the appearance of holding the emaciated bodily figure together.^k The visible veins of the ascetic are analogous to a roadmap, testifying to a personal history of self-inflicted violence.

The Buddhist Pāli textual tradition testifies to additional examples from its literature. Before he achieved enlightenment, the historical Buddha confesses to practicing extreme forms of asceticism, including eating foul substances and abstaining almost completely from food. The Pāli texts refer, for example, to visible bodily evidence of extreme fasting by the Buddha when his body became emaciated, his eyes receded into his skull, his scalp shriveled and shrank, and confessed that he could grab the skin of his abdomen and grasp his spinal cord as well as having his skin cleave to his spinal cord.^l Eventually, the Buddha rejected extreme forms of fasting and other instances of extreme self-mortification. This decision would function as a model for later monks to prove the dangers associated with excessive fasting and other extreme forms of asceticism, and induce more lay support for the monastic community (Bareau 1970). This Buddhist monastic injunction against extreme forms of fasting stands in direct contradiction to the path of Jainism.

Even though Jainism uniquely embraces nonviolence in comparison to other religious paths,^m Jain monks typically practice very strict forms of fasting with the most dramatic and paradoxically most violent being fasting unto death, manifesting an acceptance of suicide as a legitimate form of release from karmic activity. A Jain monk can chose to

die either against his will or with his will with the former being the choice of ignorant people, whereas the latter is a wise decision (*Uttarādhyayana* Sūtra 1921). From the Jain perspective, the basic problem with dying against one's will is the following: It binds a person to the cycle of rebirth and accompanying sorrow and is thus counter productive.

Overall, there are three ways for a Jain monk to die: (1) path of *bhattapaccakkhana* involves rejecting food until winning release, but allowing other monks to move one's body; (2) *paovagamana* consists of imitating a motionless tree while fasting and waiting for death; (3) *ingimmarana* means for a monk to seek refuge in a circumscribed location and being responsible for one's bodily movements.ⁿ A key aspect in these practices is whether or not they assume either a posture of not moving or moving (Schubring 1935). Nonetheless, the most authentic and pure way to die for a monk is *sallekhana* (fasting unto death), which was a formal affair involving renunciation of malice towards enemies, relinquishing friends, wealth, and confessing of misdeeds. What makes this form of self-inflicted violence pure is that it does not increase one's passions (Caillat 1964). Jain literature rejected drowning, burning, poisoning, or jumping from a high place to commit suicide. There is also no fault, however, with offering one's body to vultures after lacerating it because the flesh serves as food for the birds.^o The common thread making these forms of suicide acceptable is whether or not they violate the spirit of nonviolence (*ahimsā*) and thus the accumulation of negative karma.

The observance of fasting is not restricted to Jain ascetics because lay members of the religion practice it regularly during the fall festival of Paryusam, involving fasting for longer periods of time in addition to the usually observed twice a month regimen of fasting by the laity. Whatever the length of fasting, it is always associated with a strict vegetarian diet. This type of lay observance is intimately connected with the Jain conviction that consciousness is a feature of many natural phenomenon within the world, such as a rock, water, fire, air, and plant, because each of these things possess a soul that expresses its consciousness through ordinary sense faculties, such as touch, taste, smell, and sight (Chapple 2011). It is the central nature of fasting in the Jain religion and its rejection of the sacredness of food that distinguishes its path from the Brāhmanical tradition and from the Buddhist path by making fasting a central feature of the ascetic path and practice of the laity (Jaini 2000).

Food and violence

By achieving an emaciated condition, the Indian ascetic manifests an overt rejection of normal social food transactions that constitute a social code that defines and reinforces prevailing hierarchical social structures and interpersonal relationships. The cosmic and social significance of food is evident in Indian texts from ancient times because it plays a central role in the Vedic sacrificial cult when a sacrificer bonds with the gods, a feature that is often expressed by the sacrificer becoming food (ŚB 3.6.3.19). By having to wait for his chance to consume the sacrificial offering, the sacrificer manifests his inferior status in relation to the deities.

According to the ancient *Chāndogya Upanisad* (6.4-6.5), food serves as the third quality in a hierarchically ranked order that characterizes all existence: light or brilliance (*tejas*), water (*āpas*), and food (*annan*). Not simply satisfied with this ranking of the three basic

categories, the sage of the text identifies each of them respectively with their essence: speech (*vāc*), breath (*prāna*), and mind (*manas*). As the sage continues with his speculation, he asserts that mind, for instance, is the essence of food, a life sustaining matter, and also associates each basic category with a corresponding color (red, white, and black). The sage illustrates his ranking by analyzing the phenomenon of fire, which consists of light in the form of a red flame, water in the form of white smoke, and food represented by dark wood that fire eats and its ashes that symbolize fire's excrement. This type of analysis continues by being applied to the triple cosmos (*loka*) of heaven, atmosphere, and earth (associated with dark soil, plants, and food). From this cosmic connection, the sage associates the three basic qualities with the hierarchical social order: priests are associated with the heavens, flame and light, warriors suggest the atmosphere, lightning bolt, and water, and commoners (third ranked caste of *Vaiśya*) are related to the dark earth, labor, dirt, excrement, and food. Fundamentally, the three basic qualities form the foundation of existence and are interrelated throughout the cosmos. Embedded within religious speculation of the *Taittiriya Upanisad* (2.1), it is claimed that food is a manifestation of and a part of Brahman, non-dual, ultimate reality with worldly creatures being produced by food, being nurtured by means of food, and finally passing into food. With respect to the Ātman (self) in this text, it is food that is identified as its foundation, and is covered by the five sheaths that hide the genuine self, which are identified with food along with breath, mind, bliss, and understanding. According to the *Praśna Upanisad* (1.14), food also plays a role in the life-cycle and rebirth when digested food creates semen that eventually becomes a person.

By observing a strict regimen of food consumption, the ascetic remains for the most part outside of the social regulations pertaining to purity and pollution with respect to eating, saliva, type of food safe to consume, and persons from whom one can accept food. The ascetic also avoids the dichotomous cultural distinctions drawn about food between hot/cold, boiled/fried, human/divine, and feasting/fasting. Moreover, the ascetic evades the moral and material qualities associated with food in Indian culture.^P According to Padmanabh S. Jaini, Jain texts trace the desire for food to violence because the craving for food is at the basis of bondage, while its uprooting helps to eliminate other problems (Jaini 2000).

Because food sustains the human body with nutritious elements and helps it thrive, food is often depicted as synonymous with life itself in Indian culture, but ascetic eating behavior is contrary to promoting life because he/she strives to become dead to the world. For the ascetic, food does not have a role as a commodity within a socio-economic system of exchange among human beings or between humans and divine beings. The ascetic is unconcerned and detached from the nutritional value of food for physical health, its role in shaping temperament, its influence on the emotions, and its contribution to achieving longevity.

Nonetheless, there is a direct connection made between violence and pain, such as that caused by extreme forms of fasting. An excellent textual verification of the inter-relationship between violence, pain, and fasting is lucidly made in a fifth century Jain text, the *Aptamīmāṃsā* of Samantabhadra, who responds to a question about whether or not violence can be praiseworthy. He acknowledges that violence causes pain and causing pain is always wrong but causing pain to oneself for the sake of liberation is praiseworthy. If pain is self-inflicted, it results in virtue (*punya*), whereas evil (*pāpa*)

results from happiness created by oneself.⁴ Even though a person practicing extreme forms of asceticism gets rid of attachment (*rāga*) and aversion (*dveṣā*), he/she still causes pain to his/her body.

By using fasting as an example of self-inflicted violence by the Indian ascetic, this approach helps us to witness that violence and nonviolence are relative concepts because their degrees of social acceptability differ among religious cultures and even within particular religions. The relative nature of violence and nonviolence can also be traced to its acceptability during changing historical periods and circumstances. Even though violence and nonviolence are relative notions, violence signifies actions that injure, causes harm or pain, or destroys an object, animal, or person, whereas non-violence is relative to other persons, animals, or things.

Theoretical perspectives on violence and nonviolence

As previously affirmed, violence and nonviolence are relative concepts because their degrees of social acceptability differ among religious cultures and even within particular religions. The relative nature of violence can also be traced to its acceptability during changing historical periods and circumstances. Moreover, from an internal perspective of a given culture, it is difficult to find members who identify their actions as violent because harsh actions are commonly equated with justice, possibly a righteous conflict, heroic actions, martyrdom, or ritual performance that results in the death of an animal or destruction of food offerings. With actions that result in pain or destruction, why would cultural insiders fail to recognize their actions are violent? It is not because cultural insiders are blind or totally unaware that their actions are violent, but it is rather that they tend to rationalize violence and thus justify it within the context of their society as necessary for the well-being of the whole (Van Kooij 1999). This scenario is partly the reason that a practice such as fasting does not appear as something violent but rather as nonviolent because the veneer of nonviolence obscures a form of self-inflicted violence.

There are some thinkers who think that violence is the natural condition of society. Agreeing with the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Jacques Ellul, a Christian realist, emphasizes the pervasive nature of violence in all cultures and historical periods because all states originate in violent actions and maintain their existence by means of it. Ellul identifies five laws of violence that can be summarized as (1) certainty; (2) reciprocity, implying that violence begets more violence; (3) sameness, suggesting that one cannot distinguish between justified and unjustified violence; (4) violence begets violence and nothing else; (5) a person who uses violence attempts to justify both it and oneself (Ellul 1969). Ellul counters this pervasive violence with what he calls the “violence of love.”

A less hopeful position about the possibility of countering violence is offered by René Girard from his neo-Freudian position that conceives of an inseparable relationship between violence and the sacred. Girard argues that humankind is naturally violent and vengeance characterizes human relationships that lead to a cycle of violence as the aggrieved party violently strives to reciprocate the violence perpetrated upon them. This cycle and orgy of violence threatens the very existence of society because it is devoid of a point of termination and can only end when society is completely

destroyed, and there is no one to respond to the last onslaught of violence. Thereby, it motivates society to seek a strategy for its survival by breaking the repetitive and destructive cycle of violence. Girard argues that it is precisely religion that channels violence by means of sacrifice, a faithful replica of an original act of violence, which protects humans from the cyclic pattern and pervasive nature of violence. Religion is able to accomplish its goal by channeling violence toward a victim, a substitute for a perpetrator of violence, whose death signifies the end of violent reprisals or recurrent, reciprocal violence. By means of the instrument and performance of a sacrifice, a community is able to subdue the destructive forces, which are unleashed by the cycle of violence, for potentially pulling asunder the social fabric that is developed and nurtured over a period of time (Girard 1977a).

Girard asserts that mimetic desire forms the foundation for human violence and the killing of a victim. This scenario suggests that humans do not know what to desire, and they turn to others to assist them, an imitative process that creates the potential for violent conflict because of competition for the same object. In order to counteract this tendency of humans, society controls individual desires either negatively by means of prohibitions and taboos, or it controls desire in a positive way by offering and enticing subjects with the promise of the intrinsic desirability of certain objects and forms of behavior. According to Girard, violence is a continuation of mimetic desire that needs religion to channel it in order to protect a community from self-annihilation.^f

In sharp contrast to Girard, Grace M. Jantzen argues that violence is not innate to humans. Not only connecting violence to an obsession with death, Jantzen emphasizes that violence is a strongly male gendered phenomenon (Jantzen 2004). In disagreement with Jantzen and in accord with Girard, Hent de Vries finds the source of violence in religion: "It can be seen as the very element of religion. No violence without (some) religion; no religion without (some) violence" (de Vries 2002). The discipline of the Indian ascetic enables us to see that violence is present in a practice such as fasting that outwardly appears to be nonviolent. It can be affirmed that nonviolence obscures the violence at the center of asceticism.

In contrast to these approaches, Arthur Kleinman is concerned with showing the multiple forms and dynamics of social violence, a procedure that does not draw a sharp division between collective and individual experiences of social violence interwoven with moral processes and emotional conditions, sustaining, and transforming the way they interact. Kleinman identifies what he calls structural violence in a society, which refers to people who experience violence because of extreme poverty (Kleinman 2000).

Kleinman's emphasis on the social and multiple types of violence are shared by Randall Collins, who advocates a micro-sociological theory of violent situations. Rather than focusing on violent people, Collins stresses violent situations because even violent people are only dangerous in a particular situation: "Most of the time, the most dangerous, most violent persons are not doing anything violent" (Collins 2008a). The violence that we witness is intertwined with fear, anger, and excitement, although it is context that remains primarily important. For Collins, violence is not only a situational process, but it is also dynamic because it begins with confrontational tension and fear (Collins 2008b). For those that might think that violence is easy as implied by the theory of Girard, Collins

stresses that it is difficult because it runs counter to the interactional nature of society. Because Collins believes that social conditions overwhelm the genetic component of violence, he criticizes the evolutionary type of theory for its insensitivity to cultural and interactional patterns because this theory neglects to consider inter-subjective interaction between humans and emotional attunement to others, rendering violence for neurologically hard-wired people difficult rather than easy.

Collins disagrees with the overall thrust of Girard's position about the innate nature of violence in humans and the role of civilization to control it: "Violence is not primordial, and civilization does not tame it; the opposite is much nearer the truth" (Collins 2008c). The violence inflicted by the Indian ascetic upon himself represents a successful ritualization of pain and injury, which is acting against oneself with the hope and even expectation of more lasting rewards. Some of the theorists of violence would agree that ascetic initiated violence occurs within a social situation that conveys a strong sense of membership in an exclusive group of like-minded individuals.

Concluding reflections

It is fair to affirm that an ascetic is seeking a new identity from the one inherited from his/her biological parents and his/her role in society. In spite of the adherence to a code of nonviolence, this attempt to achieve a new identity necessarily involves violence of some kind because acts of identity formation are themselves acts of violence, making some form of violence inescapable. When an ascetic, for instance, attempts to define oneself against others the definer sets in motion a cycle of violence that is innate to the nature of religion and identity formation.

The effort to find or work-out a new identity is both an existential quest and an imaginative construct. Because of the role that the imagination plays in this process of identity construction, what is produced is by nature manufactured, unstable, and tenuous. The artificial and tentative nature of identity construction that is visible on the body of the ascetic, such as his/her veins, functions as a mask that mystifies any observing other. This means that the violence utilized to achieve the configuration and status of an ascetic is subverted, hidden, and displaced from others of the prevailing society. The apparently overt nonviolent ascetic is merely a constructed representation, but he/she is really, however, the opposite of this mere appearance. In a sense, the ascetic assumes a religious authority grounded in his/her regime, although his/her authority as an ascetic is grounded in violence and not in any vow of nonviolence. Ultimately, violence is authorized by religion itself, which is intimately interconnected with violence in spite of protestations to the contrary.

Since religion is interconnected with violence and religion is an aspect of culture, it is possible to acknowledge that the roots of culture are nurtured in the soil of violence. Asceticism is woven into the fabric of Indian and western cultures, and is associated with a practice and life-style that is exclusivistic and particularistic. Asceticism is also closely associated with an emphasis on denial, identity formation, and is encompassed by a metaphysics of violence. There are attempts to deny or mask this violence by uttering vows of nonviolence by the ascetic, but the violence still remains because it forms the soil from which practices, such as asceticism, can grow.

Endnotes

^a For a more complete discussion of the life-style of the Hindu ascetic, see (Sprockhoff 1976); (Olivelle 1986, 1987) and "Introduction," to (Olivelle 1992). For historical studies of Indian asceticism, see (Bhagat 1976) and (Chakraborti 1973); (Rukmani 2011); Freiberger (2009). For a cross cultural approach, see the essays edited by (Frieberger 2006). For a work that focuses on the ascetic organization in the city of Kashi and the Kumbha Melā, see (Surajit Sinha and Baidyanath Saraswati 1978).

^b See the following works for discussions about the self-inflicted violence by the Hindu ascetic: (Olson 1980); (Coomarswamy 1942); (Lorenzen 1972); (Parry 1985).

^c See (Vidal et al. 1994).

^d See (Houben 1999).

^e See (Lakoff and Johnson 1999).

^f The Book of the Discipline Volume 4 (Mahāvagga), trans. I. B. Horner (London: Luzac & Company, Ltd., 1962), 1.55; Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikāya), Volume 2, trans. I. B. Horner (London: Luzac & Company, Ltd., 1970), 2.1.473. The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Sanyutta Nikāya, 5 Vols., trans. Mrs. Rhys Davids and F. L. Woodward (London: Luzac & Company, 1965-1972), 1.402; 4.120.

^g Book of the Kindred Sayings, 4.239.

^h Buddhaghosa, 1.93.

ⁱ (Jaini 1979). For a discussion about the importance of classification for Indian culture, see (Smith 1994).

^j 1963. The Book of Discipline (Cullavagga), vol. 5, trans. I. B. Horner, 1.9.1-5. London: Luzac & Company, Ltd.

^k See (Minoru 1995).

^l 1967. The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikāya), vol. 3 vols., trans. I. B. Horner, 1.245–246. London: Luzac.

^m 1973. Akaranga Sūtra in Jaina Sutras, vol. 2 vols., trans. Hermann Jacobi, Sacred Books of the East, 22, 45, 1–1.7. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

ⁿ Akaranga Sūtra, 1.7.8.12.

^o Schubring, 182.

^p See the following essay for a discussion of the relationship between food and Indian culture: (Khare 1992).

^q 2010. Apta Mīmāmasā of Achārya Samantabhadra, vol. Second edition, trans. Saratchandra Ghosal, 9.93. New Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpith.

^r (Girard 1977b) p. 148. An alternative to Girard's position is offered by the anthropologist Maurice Bloch, who claims that Girard assumes an innate human aggressiveness that is controlled ritual. Bloch writes, "In contrast, I do not base myself on some innate propensity to violence but argue that violence is itself a result of the attempt to create the transcendent in religion and politics" (p. 7). In *Prey Into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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