An eminent scholar recently came to our university campus and spoke about the role of diverse religious communities of the world and their attitudes toward the environment. He showed examples from several indigenous communities from the North America, South America, Africa and Asia. However, when he referred to the traditions of India, he used these words: "India has the most bizarre culture in the world where even a cobra is worshipped. This is a bit of an overshoot." What amazed me was that even in this supposedly globalized world that we live in, India continues to mystify scholars. While most Americans are familiar with the terms such as "yoga" and "Bollywood," Indian perspectives toward the ecology seem to be largely unknown.

It is true that cobras are worshipped by many Hindus, especially on a specific festival dedicated to them (just as there are specific festivals for mountains, rivers, cows, trees and hundreds of other gods and goddesses throughout India). What is not commonly known is that Mahatma Gandhi had a brief encounter with a cobra at his ashram (retreat) once and he too did not want it to be killed by his colleagues. This is one of the shining examples of Indian environmentalism, not an "overshoot" as called by our scholar friend mentioned above. Several scientific studies have pointed out that every being in nature is intrinsically valuable because every other being is directly or indirectly dependent on each other's survival. This is the fundamental motivation of scientists and environmentalists to save the biodiversity in every part of our planet. Therefore, even a cobra has the right to survive. Moreover, other beings have an intrinsic duty to protect it as long as it is not a threat to them.

More than 2,500 years ago in India, Mahavira and Buddha taught the same concept, although in a different framework of philosophy, spirituality and ethics. Mahavira, the last great teacher of Jainism, even proclaimed that ahimsa (nonviolence) is the greatest dharma. (Dharma's meanings include religion, ethics, duty, virtue, righteousness and cosmic law.) Several Hindu and Buddhist texts also propound the same principle in different languages. According to most of these texts, ahimsa improves one's karma. For observant Hindus, Jains and Buddhists, hurting or harming another being damages one's karma and obstructs advancement toward moksha (liberation). To prevent the further accrual of bad karma, they are instructed to avoid activities associated with violence and to follow a vegetarian diet (meat consumption in India has historically been very less compared to elsewhere). They also oppose the institutionalized breeding and killing of animals, birds and fish for human consumption. Just this month, my book is published based on my research with three communities in India and the diaspora with several ecological practices inspired by the Indic traditions.
Although yoga is widely known in the West, what is not so widely known is that yoga is a system of eight "limbs" or components. The very first step of the first limb of yoga is ahimsa. Unless one is firmly rooted in ahimsa in one's thoughts, speech and actions, true practice of yoga cannot begin. In addition, since Gandhi was a dedicated practitioner of ahimsa (and other yogic principles), he can be called a great yogi even though he might not have practiced all the stretching exercises that we commonly refer to as yoga. It is this practice of yoga that develops one's harmony with and reverence for nature in which even a cobra is not to be killed.

When I first mentioned this to my own students recently, one immediately questioned me and asked if Indians in India are not following the principles of Gandhi, how can we expect the same from others? I partially agreed with her. India (and many other emerging nations in the world) is enthusiastically aping the West with its ever-expanding economy and ever-shrinking natural resources. I was also asked recently at a conference on world religions and ecology, what do the non-Western countries expect of the Western countries? If the rest of the world is eager to make the same mistakes as the West did, what route should the West now take to ensure the planet's survival? Perhaps, one answer could be to embrace Gandhi and his ecological practices. If the West is to remain the intellectual leader of the world, the quicker it reforms and transforms itself, the better for our planet. While the West continues to crave more natural resources without changing its lifestyle, it will continue to lack the moral authority to preach to other cultures. It was the West that led the world with its modern scientific and technological innovations for the last several centuries. It will have to be the West that emerges as a new ecological leader, with Gandhi as the foundation of its lifestyle. All voices to save the planet's ecology are hollow rhetoric until that happens.

There cannot be and should not be separate "war on terrorism," "war on climate change," "war on drugs," "war on corruption," "war on obesity" and so on. Our physical, mental and spiritual health, the environment, the global security, international peace and social justice -- it seems like everything will get a great boost if we first become nonviolent in our most basic activity: eating and surviving. "We are what we eat." It is such a simple statement and yet is so widely ignored all over the world. This is the way Gandhi lived everyday and his protest against the imperial power was influential because it was based on his own great life, unlike many contemporary activists whose own lives are nowhere close to the Gandhi's.

Gandhi's entire life can be seen as an ecological treatise. This is one life in which every minute act, emotion or thought functioned much like an ecosystem: his small meals of nuts and fruits, his morning ablutions and everyday bodily practices, his periodic observances of silence, his morning walks, his cultivation of the small as much as of the big, his spinning wheel, his abhorrence of waste, his resorting to basic Hindu and Jain values of truth, nonviolence, celibacy and fasting. The moralists, nonviolent activists, feminists, journalists, social reformers, trade union leaders, peasants, prohibitionists, nature-cure lovers, renouncers and environmentalists all take their inspirations from Gandhi's life and other dharmic teachings.

As an alternative perspective on contemporary India, despite all the recent advances in India's economy and consumerism, Gandhi's inspiration still thrives in modern India. Here are contemporary environmental activists and dharmic leaders who have modeled their lives taking their inspirations from dharmic teachings of India or have resisted the global consumerist
pressure in various other ways: Sunderlal Bahuguna, now in his 80s, leader of the famous Chipko Movement in North India; Medha Patkar, a strong voice against big dams in Central India; Dr. Vandana Shiva, fierce critic of Western style globalism and capitalism; Anna Hazare, in headlines recently for his major protest against political corruption and also famous for ecological experiments in his village in Central India; Pandurang Hedge, who is leading Chipko style movement in South India; late Pandurang Shastri Athavale (I have written about his global Swadhyaya Parivar in my book); late Anil Agarwal, founder of Center for Science and Environment; Dr. Ramachandra Guha, another fierce critic of Western-style consumerism, capitalism and environmentalism, including deep ecology; and hundreds of smaller voices spread all over India making India the land of biggest environmental movement on the planet (as noted by Dr. Christopher Chapple in his volume on Hinduism and ecology published by Harvard University). There are also dozens of institutions in several Indian towns founded by Gandhi himself that are still flourishing with their own small-scale production of textiles and agriculture. In addition, almost every Indian political party must use at least the rhetoric based on Gandhi's values whenever there is a discussion on taking technology or any kind of help from the U.S., U.K., France or other major Western power. They all immediately attack their political opponents as if somebody just was "sold out to the West." Finally, there are several recent major Bollywood blockbusters with several Gandhi-like figures reminding the audience of the message of Gandhi (nonviolence and civil disobedience).

Yes, Gandhi's immortal soul and other dharmic traditions of India are still vibrant even in the 21st-century globalized consumerist society. Several decades ago, in his nonviolent movement for civil rights, Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method." It is time again to go back to these cherished values propounded by Christ, Gandhi and Dr. King: nonviolence not just toward other human beings but also toward the entire earth. All three also practiced and preached an absolute simple lifestyle and it is time again to practice the same lifestyle.

Please join me on a free Webinar on May 19 to discuss these topics further. Click here to register online.

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