AHIMSA CENTER

NONVIOLENCE IN THOUGHT AND ACTION

www.cpp.edu/ahimsacenter

2019-2020

NEWSLETTER

Cal Poly Pomona Receives Ahimsa Center Endowment for **Shri Shantinath Chair in Ahimsa Studies**
see page 3

FROM THE DIRECTOR

GREETINGS to the seekers and supporters of ahimsa! This is a special issue on Ahimsa and the Pandemic.

The pandemic is an unprecedented disaster which continues to rage globally, hitting the US the hardest in terms of people infected and dead. Further, it has exposed the stark reality of expanding poverty, rising homelessness, escalating food insecurity and the mounting unemployment and evictions. The pandemic has deepened divides and increased anxieties amid growing uncertainty.

In this context, I wish to highlight the importance of generosity, a vital aspect of ahimsa. Generosity is an act of selfless kindness. It includes giving of time, money, resources, food; donating blood, organs, and providing voluntary service of any kind for a cause or for the benefit of others. Practicing generosity, research suggest, is beneficial to the giver and the recipient; it leads to happiness.

In the middle of the pandemic, when most are gripped by the fear of disease, the frontline workers, doctors, and nurses are rendering services beyond the call of duty, while exposing themselves to the risks of infection and even death so that others may live. Scientists and medical professionals have single-mindedly pursued the development of the vaccine. System scientists and engineers at Johns Hopkins University created a dashboard to keep the world informed of an accurate count of the infected and the dead. Foodbanks are feeding the increasing number of people meet their basic need. Those employed in essential services risk daily to serve others in various ways. And yet, such acts are under-appreciated as self-aggrandizing politics overwhelm us all, making responsible acts of wearing masks, observing social distancing -- the basics of keeping all safe-- a matter of divisive politics.

We are all capable of being generous and must in our own ways help others in the spirit of ahimsa. At the least, we must ensure that our attitude and acts do not harm others.

While the pandemic has disrupted regular activities of the Ahimsa Center, the work continues. And now with the generosity of Prem and Sandhya Jain, Jasvant and Meera Modi, Bipin and Rekha Shah, the Center's work will continue in perpetuity. I wish to thank them for their enduring gift of Ahimsa Center Endowment for *Shri Shantinath Chair in Ahimsa Studies*, and also to thank the university leaders for their support. Thanks also to the contributors for sharing their thoughts on the Pandemic; to the guest editor, Dr. Danita Dodson, for her enthusiastic assistance; to our readers for their sustained interest and engagement with the Center.

I invite you all to a series of thought-provoking virtual events (page 16) in the coming months and wish you a COVID-FREE 2021!

Tara Sethia is professor of history and Director of the Ahimsa Center. She coordinates the Minor in Nonviolence Studies, directs the K-12 educator Institutes on Nonviolence, organizes and hosts Center's public programs. Dr. Sethia's books include *Ahimsa, Anekanta and Jainism; Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change ;* and, *The Living Gandhi .*

Ahimsa Endowment Donors for Shri Shantinath Chair in Ahimsa Studies

- Prem and Sandhya Jain
- Jasvant and Meera Modi
- Bipin and Rekha Shah

Ahimsa Patrons

- Hamilton and Denise Brewart

Ahimsa Sponsors

- Darbari S. Seth Foundation
- Pravin and Sudha Mody
- Jagdish and Madhu Sheth

Charter Sponsors

- Gems International (Harish & Sunil Daga)
- Navindra and Madhu Jain
- JAINA
- Romesh and Kathleen Wadhwani

Founding Sponsors

- Ratan and Madhu Baid
- Manilal and Savita Mehta
- Tulsi and Gita Savani
- Girish and Datta Shah
- Nitin and Hiten Shah
- Jayesh and Ramila Shah
- Jeff Smith
- Ravi and Vandana Tilak

Sustaining Sponsors

- Vikram and Upma Budhraja
- Akbar and Nisreen Firdosy
- Pradeep and Meenakshi Iyer
- Shankar and Malathi Narayan

Major Sponsors

- Sanjay and Harshada Kucheria
- Suresh and Vimala Lodha
- Lunar Design
- Vasan and Neerja Raman
- Sarva Mangal Trust (Manu & Rika Shah)

Sponsors

- Naren and Kusum Bakshi
- The Dalai Lama Foundation
- Navin and Pratima Doshi
- Vikram and Anjana Kamdar
- Steve McCauley
- Pramod and Roshni Patel

Supporters

- Subramaniam and Ulhas Bala
- Amarjit Gill
- Chetan and Nita Sanghvi
- Sharad and Shakuntala Saraf
- Mary Schriner

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Sponsorship Opportunities

Several sponsorship opportunities are available, including opportunities for naming a public lecture, a conference, and the Ahimsa Center. Center welcomes donations in any amount. If you are interested in exploring how you can get involved with the Center or wish to donate to the Center, please contact the Director (909) 869-3868 or email tsethia@cpp.edu.

Executive Editor: **Dr. Tara Sethia**
Guest Editor: **Dr. Danita Dodson**

Shri Shantinath Endowed Chair in Ahimsa Studies

Three leading sponsors of the Ahimsa Center have generously funded an endowment to support in perpetuity the Ahimsa Center and establish the Shri Shantinath Chair in Ahimsa Studies. The Chair will teach courses in nonviolence and serve as the Director of the Ahimsa Center. This will provide continuity in the important work of the Center to advance the agenda of social justice and common good anchored in ahimsa. On behalf of the University, the Dean of the College of Letters, Arts and the Social Science Iris Levine, the Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs Sylvia Alva, and the Vice President for University Advancement Daniel Montplaisir played an important role in this endeavor. Celebration planned for Friday, February 19, 5:00-6:15 p.m. PST

Prem and Sandhya Jain

Prem Jain is the CEO and Co-founder of the Pensando Systems, a cloud and enterprise data center startup in the SF Bay area. He has served as the President of JAINA, JCNC, and currently chairs JITO, USA. Together with his wife, Sandhya, their two sons and their spouses, they have started the Jain Family foundation to support projects that align with values of nonviolence, compassion and service. Prem and Sandhya are actively involved with Jain community in the US and in India and support many initiatives for their benefit. They have endowed chairs at UC -Davis, University of Wisconsin at Madison, and other universities. The Jains are active hikers, and love to spend their spare time with their grandchildren.

Bipin and Rekha Shah

Bipin Shah is the CEO of Kovair Software in SF Bay area. He and his wife, Rekha, live in Lafayette, CA. They have been active in the Jain Center of Northern California, which has also been the recipient of their significant philanthropic contributions to date. In addition, they have supported many educational initiatives anchored in Jain values of ahimsa such as the endowed chaired positions in Jain Studies at Florida International University, University of North Texas and the University of Wisconsin at Madison. They have also sponsored a Plant-based Food Curriculum at Cal Poly Pomona, and support several rural educational initiatives in India. The Shahs have a son, two daughters and four grandchildren.

Jasvant and Meera Modi

Dr. Jasvant Modi is a gastroenterologist by profession. Currently he is in healthcare business. Dr. Modi has been involved with national and local Jain organizations in leadership roles. His wife, Meera Modi, is also a medical doctor. Their philanthropic initiatives are wide-ranging. Drs. Modi have been involved in supporting more than a dozen endowed chair/professorships in Jain Studies on UC, CSU, and other campuses in the US. They support scores of NGOs and nonprofits devoted to education, medical services, women's empowerment, rural development, art, religion, politics and culture both in the US and India. They live in La Canada and have a son and a daughter.

Ahimsa and Higher Education

Ahimsa, Working People, and the Pandemic

By Andrew Moss, Ph.D.

In addition to the enormous toll it has exacted on human life, the Coronavirus pandemic has brought with it immeasurable economic suffering, leading to the loss of millions of jobs and accelerating long-standing trends toward greater inequality. Before the spread of the virus, many Americans faced food or housing insecurity (or both), and the onset of the pandemic added millions more to the rolls of those seeking extra assistance to feed their families or keep a roof over their heads. Moreover, a disproportionate number of people in these predicaments have been from communities of color.

Viewed within the context of this profound devastation, the role of ahimsa – as philosophy, strategy, and way of life – has become more important than ever.

For more than a century, nonviolence has played a significant role in advancing the dignity and economic status of working people, particularly through the support of organized labor. Leaders like M.K. Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, and Dolores Huerta employed nonviolent strategies to raise consciousness about the struggles of the working poor and to foster solidarity and discipline that helped workers organize. Today the legacy of these leaders and the movements they inspired continue to reverberate in struggles on behalf of workers' dignity, fair wages, and decent working conditions. Several years after Dr. King was tragically cut down by an assassin's bullet in 1968, his colleague and friend, the Reverend James M. Lawson, moved from Memphis to Los Angeles, becoming pastor of Holman United Methodist Church, and, in 1993, co-founding the interfaith organization, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE).

CLUE, which has become a home of sorts to me since I retired from teaching at Cal Poly Pomona several years ago, allies itself with unions and other organizations on behalf of workers' and immigrants' rights. It has played a significant role in helping workers organize in a variety of occupations (security guards, hotel housekeepers, car wash workers), and it has been an important contributor to local campaigns for a living wage and for protection against sexual harassment.

Participating in a variety of street actions ranging from prayer vigils and interfaith religious ceremonies to straightforward picketing, I came to appreciate the transformative power of solidarity among workers – the pride and courage it instilled as they spoke up for fair wages and humane working conditions. This, I saw, was the power of ahimsa, the power of collective nonviolent discipline.

Today, the pandemic and its aftermath have set immense challenges before low-wage workers, causing massive layoffs and placing so many on the edge of economic survival. It will be a long and difficult struggle simply to recoup what has been lost. But in the years I've spent with CLUE, I've been impressed by the energy and creativity of young, upcoming leaders – individuals who can take the nonviolent traditions of the past and adapt them to radically new circumstances. It is from this continuity of leadership and vision that I take hope for the future.

Andrew Moss *is an emeritus Professor of English from Cal Poly Pomona, Andrew Moss served as an adviser and faculty member in the Ahimsa Center from 2004 to 2014. He serves on the Center's Advisory Board.*

Pandemic and My Conversation with a Young Jain

By Claire Maes, Ph.D.

It's Friday evening, August 28. The first week of the Fall semester is over. The start of an academic year is notoriously hectic for everyone involved. The current pandemic caused by COVID-19 does not make anything easier: new teaching modes, new policies, new expectations. I have every right to feel tired, but I don't. I feel inspired and energized. The reason? I just came off an hour-and-a-half long zoom call with Ketan Kapasi, a UT Austin graduate. He is articulate and ambitious. Ketan is a young but successful tech product manager. He is politically engaged, having recently helped the campaign of the 2020 presidential candidate Andrew Yang. He is also a Jain, and it is for this reason we met.

I am a scholar of South Asia, working at the Asian Studies Department of UT Austin. One of the courses I teach this semester is "Jainism: Religion of Nonviolence." I talked with Ketan because I would like him to meet my students and explain how Jainism informs his

Continued on following page

daily life and world outlook. One important argument I make in my course, is that religion is not just located in the texts, but also in what people say and do. To put it simply, without Jains there is no Jainism. Ketan speaks passionately about his religion. Having an inquisitive mind, he is also critical and self-reflective. We agreed on the date and format of his lecture, and the conversation quickly took its own turn, changing into a mind-picking philosophical discussion. Who can speak for Jainism? What role do scriptures play for modern Jains? Should progressive ideas meet and merge with traditional Jain values, and, if so, how? How important are local Jain communities to develop a sense of belonging?

As a leader in Young Jain of Americans (YJA), Ketan brings young Jains together. Before the pandemic, the events would take place in convention centers. Now, they are held online but they are no less dynamic. While community clearly matters for Ketan, he does not consider it necessary. Like many Jains today, Ketan views his religion as a "way of life" that focusses on the betterment of the self. For him, applying Jainism means learning to overcome one's internal enemies, the passions of anger, pride, deceitfulness, and greed. Hearing about Ketan's understanding of Jainism, I was reminded of the importance of looking inward.

The pandemic has been impacting everyone in some way or other. While we may debate the nature of changes caused by the pandemic, we may all agree that it is altering the way we view and experience the world. For many the world has become less familiar, more threatening, and more loudly unjust. The world is changing. It always has, but now more clearly so.

The pandemic is causing a rupture in our lived experience, but with this rupture comes an opportunity. The realization that there is a power in standing still and in self-reflection.

There is an urgent need of bettering oneself. One can, like Ketan, start by becoming aware, and learn to overcome anger, pride, deceitfulness, and greed.

Claire Maes, *a native of Belgium, is a scholar of South Asian religions and languages. She works at the University of Texas at Austin where she researches and teaches Jainism, Buddhism, and Sanskrit . In August 2021, she will join the California State University, Northridge in Los Angeles as the Bhagwaan Ajitnath Endowed Professor* in the Department of Religious Studies.

IN MEMORIAM

Lessons from John Lewis for a Pandemic Stricken World

By Nirmal Sethia, Ph.D.

Apart from the damage the COVID-19 pandemic has caused to almost all aspects of our lives, it has also exacerbated the divides of inequality and poverty and added urgency to the agenda of social justice. The life and the work of Rep. John R. Lewis, the Civil Rights icon who died on July 17, 2020, offers us some vital lessons for dealing with the repercussion of the pandemic:

Fight. Lewis's signature idea is that of a commitment to "**making good trouble, the necessary trouble.**" What it means is that we must not ignore problems of injustice, inequality and the denial of basic rights by succumbing to the temptation to avoid causing trouble. Instead, we should have the courage to do what is a moral necessity—to make trouble, to fight for redressing such problems, and to speak out against inaction.

How should we fight? The answer from Lewis is clear and unequivocal: our fight, our struggle, must be guided by the principles of **nonviolence**. He stated, "In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way."

To what end should we fight? Lewis enjoins us to do our part in building what Dr. Martin Luther King called **the beloved community**, connoting a society based on justice, inclusion, dignity, nonviolence and love of one's fellow human beings.

And, what makes us ready for the fight? Lewis also showed us through personal example that to be ready to make good trouble for realizing the beloved community by walking the path of nonviolence, we have to cultivate in ourselves certain essential **virtues**. Sincerity, courage, resolve and humility are such virtues which Lewis personified in his life and his work.

Lastly, let us heed the final message Lewis gave us in an essay he wrote very close to the end of his life: "Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe…, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide."

Nirmal Sethia *is Professor Emeritus, Management and Human Resources Department, Cal Poly Pomona. He serves on the Advisory Board of the Ahimsa Center.*

FEATURED PUBLIC AND SPECIAL EVENTS 2019-2020

The Center hosted the 2019 Public Lecture named after Pradeep and Meenakshi Iyer. Held on October 19, the lecture was delivered by David Barun Kumar Thomas on the theme, "Relevance of Gandhi for Our Fractured World." Thomas discussed the significance of Gandhi's message of truth, ahimsa and equality for our times. A dynamic Q & A session ensued after the lecture and was followed by vegan-vegetarian lunch for all.

Left: Tara Sethia, Center Director, felicitating and thanking Dr. Pradeep Iyer and his wife, Meenakshi Iyer for their active engagement with and continuing support of the Ahimsa Center.

Below: Attentive and engaged audience.

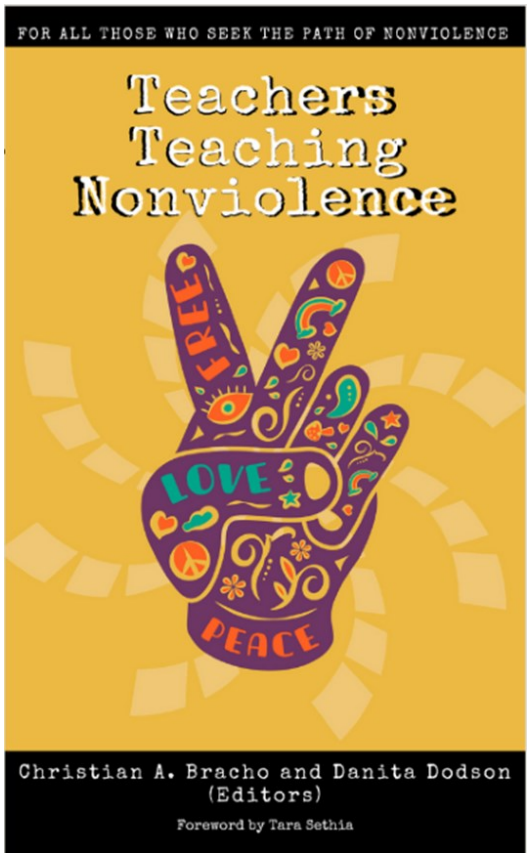
Right: Barun K. Thomas sharing his thoughts and insights on the continuing relevance of Gandhi's idea for our world engulfed in multiple crises—political, economic and environmental.

Below: Inquisitive attendees asking questions in dialogue with the speaker.

In wheel chair: Mr. Satyamurthi Iyer

Ahimsa Center Hosts A Virtual Public Launch of the Book

October 2, 2020



Co-editors Dr. Christian Bracho and Dr. Danita Dodson (above) have compiled and the essays by 19 Ahimsa Fellows —K-12 educators trained in the histories, philosophies, and practices of nonviolence at the intensive two-week residential institutes hosted by the Ahimsa Center at Cal Poly Pomona. The book is published by the DIO Press, 2020.

Drawn from all over the U.S. and representing diverse grade levels and subject areas, these teachers returned to their educational institutions and communities to continue the work of nonviolence in their teaching practices.

Their stories in this book illustrate the powerful impact nonviolence education can have in the lives of students as well as teachers, as they navigate schools plagued by physical violence and emotional stress of standardized curricula and assessments.

The book emphasizes the ways that teachers can act as agents of nonviolent social change through curricular experiments and pedagogical innovations, shifting attention toward nonviolence as an uplifting and humanizing alternative to the corrosive ways of violence.

In her opening welcome and congratulatory remarks, **Dr. Sylvia Alva (left),** Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs explained that one of the major projects of the Ahimsa Center is the development of the Ahimsa Fellows, who, as the book attests to, have "emerged as beacons of light to all those who wish to promote nonviolence-centered curricular innovation in our schools. The book she said is "the first of its kind…"

Dr. Iris Levine, Dean of the College of Letters, Arts & Social Sciences, congratulated the Center Director, the co-editors and the authors while recalling her first-hand experience with the "transformative work," the ahimsa fellows were doing under the Center leadership during the Summer on campus. The Dean noted that the various projects of the teachers "surpassed my wildest dreams of what ahimsa was...I was struck by the creativity and innovation of the teachers." She expressed her commitment to and support for the Ahimsa Center.

In her introductory remarks, **Dr. Tara Sethia**, Director of Ahimsa Center, underscored the urgent need and importance of education about nonviolence. The Ahimsa institutes for educators, she explained, serves to create a "fellowship of the future" binding ahimsa fellows who collectively share a commitment for advancing nonviolence education. These fellows are playing a leadership role in their schools and communities as is evident from the essays in the book.

The Co-editors shared their exciting journeys leading to this book and the pleasure of working with the contributing authors. They highlighted the wide-ranging topics represented in the book.

The contributors too shared their thought provoking insights. The event concluded with comments and questions from the audience leading to a dynamic dialogue about the value of nonviolence education.

Ahimsa and K-12 Education

A Higher Approach in the Midst of the Pandemic

By Donna Hill

Recently, I was zooming with a group of friends to discuss the book *The Joy of Living* by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. As we virtually contemplated together the tenets of Tibetan Buddhism, we started discussing the role of compassion in activists who want to make changes in our society. Several of these friends expressed an inability to understand how we can be compassionate toward people who we perceive as doing us harm. They felt angry, frustrated, and unable to meet hatred with love, incapable of dismissing the trauma of racist aggression so that they might feel compassion for the perpetrator. I shared with them Gandhi's belief that the changemaker's power came through appealing to the moral values of the oppressive British and showing nonviolent courage, perseverance, and self-discipline when confronted with violence and brutality.

Similarly, when speaking at Representative John Lewis' funeral, Reverend James Lawson reminded us that, even amid virulent hatred that he and Lewis both faced in the sit-ins, they stayed peaceful because they were convinced they had truth and justice on their side. Many young activists today have likewise learned the lesson of meeting force peacefully and, therefore, having the upper hand. That was obvious with the Portland protests this past summer, which were, for the most part, peaceful despite the federal agents trying to stop protestors with arrests, tear gas, and rubber bullets.

The lesson here is to carry love and compassion in our hearts for those who violate our rights, dignity, and very humanity. Martin Luther King, Jr. instructed us to love our enemy into submission, to love the opponent into being moved and changed to do the right thing. I realized in the discussion with my friends how difficult that it is to transform our hurt and trauma not just into wanting what is best for the oppressor but also into believing in the Buddhist definition of compassion: to identify every person as the same as I am, to know that we are all one. The South African concept of "ubuntu," as explained by Bishop Desmond Tutu, is "I am because we are." What happens to one of us, happens to us all.

Michelle Obama's claim still echoes in my ears, that we "take the higher ground" even while witnessing a president in 2020 who seemed to find lower and lower ground, and yet who had supporters for reelection. How hard it is to maintain loving-kindness and compassion! However, of course, no one said it was easy or timely. As I watched the moving tributes to Representative Lewis upon his death, I was reminded of a man's life that reflected peaceful and effective protest: "Good Trouble." He warned us not "to get lost in a sea of despair," and he showed us that the struggle for justice takes a lifetime.

If we can choose a lifetime based on love and compassion rather than anger and hatred, why not?

Donna Hill, *a 2005 Ahimsa Fellow, has taught high school for 33 years, primarily at Cleveland Humanities Magnet. Though retired, she remains committed to using education as the vehicle for change and serve as a mentor t o many.*

The Need to Be Heard: Pandemic, Racial Justice, andTeaching

By Adam Dennis

Around the world in the year 2020, there has been a pervasive and deeply felt need to be heard that rumbles like a volcano ready to explode. I saw it in my students last spring as we dealt with remote learning amid the quarantine. I felt it in fellow educators as we planned for a new school year characterized by the unknown. I heard it in the racial justice protests around the world. Without a voice for so long, those silenced will scream and demand to be heard.

It is up to those in power to listen. *Hard*. When they don't, or won't, it looks like it does where I live. Portland, Oregon, has been a testing ground for invading authoritarian government agents under the guise of law and order. The U.S. Constitution has been shredded here before our collective eyes every night. One side simply wants to be heard; the other responds with deafness and indifference.

However, in the mighty words of the late John Lewis, the Civil Rights Icon, "If you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have a moral obligation to do something about it." This sentiment echoes across time and space in the spirit

Continued on following page

of Gandhi, Mandela, Chavez, Huerta, Dr. King, and others. Like these heroic leaders, teachers have a moral obligation to address this collective scream in their school environments. So many of us have been awakened and are joining this work with vigor. It is vital that we remember to listen, value, and elevate our students' just voices.

The world turns. For much of this pandemic, I have felt like I am in the middle of a snow globe being constantly shaken. I do not know when the snow globe will right itself, nor when the snow particles will go from blind chaotic blizzard to a peaceful beauty. But I do know that Mr. Lewis's words have never been more right or more necessary and that "doing something" in our role as leaders is to listen. As a teacher, I know that one way forward is to do what the terrorizing federal forces in Portland have not done: transfer power. We must step down from our lofty perches as knowledge dispensers and help students elevate their voices now more than ever. The classroom (in-person or virtual) must change to become a place of dialogue and shared exploration of learning. Even as the first amendment was nightly violated in my city as journalists were attacked and arrested, our classrooms must likewise courageously honor that pillar of American values. We must devise opportunities for our students to speak, write, teach, and do.

In the spring of 2020, my school went into quarantine and remote learning for the last quarter of the school year. A colleague shared with me the idea of student passion blogs, and that is what I primarily used for weekly assignments in my English 11 classes. Students wrote each week on topics of their choosing and in styles of their choosing (with a scaffolded framework and specific requirements), and they published online. With the world happening *to* them, the students needed empowerment and support in finding their voices.

This new school year is an opportunity to shift long-held educational practices and to model the changes that millions want to see in the world. From Portland, Oregon, to London to Hong Kong, there is a persistent rumble as the volcano grows louder and louder. Let us continue the Ahimsa work by giving our students a seat at the table and then do more by sitting down beside them and and listening.

A seat at the table is desired. But I'll scream from the street if I need to.
—Darnell Lamont Walker

Adam Dennis teaches English and Mindfulness at Lake Oswego High School, a small public school outside of Portland, Oregon. He is a passionate advocate for social justice and change to support the underserved, the disenfranchised, and the voiceless. He is a 2015 Ahimsa fellow.

Reconnected in a Disconnected World

By Jode Brexa

In New Mexico where I now live, cultural and historical inequities of access to education have been intensified by the pandemic. In the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Anthony J. Wallace describes how COVID-19 has challenged the Navajo Nation with death and loss, upheaval and isolation. He writes about Native American youth and their interrupted dream "to graduate high school, find a way to go to college, get a degree, land a dream job." Not only are indigenous learners in the Southwest engulfed in these challenges, but also those I know in Mongolia, South Africa, and Central Asia are facing an uncertain future.

After schools were closed in Tajikistan and students in rural southwestern villages lost connection, I reached out to my longtime colleague Zebo Muradova, who teaches in Bokhtar in an after-school English ACCESS program supported by the U.S. Department of State. Though the non-profit American Space where the students had been meeting was closed indefinitely, the Director provided internet packages and loaned cell phones, so Zebo was able to connect with her fifteen English learners twice weekly on Google Meet.

That connection allowed Zebo and me to imagine a hybrid Digital Storytelling project for September/October 2020. In six hybrid workshops, five ACCESS girls wrote, recorded, and illustrated personal narratives of loss and loneliness amplified by the isolation of COVID-19. Munisa tells the story of the death of her youngest uncle: "That was the worst day in my life. I stopped eating. I cried all day. Even I got sick." Mahina shares the story of her father's abandonment and her mother's second marriage and divorce. Marhabo writes of the challenges when COVID-19 cancelled school and her ACCESS program: "I lost my hope and motivation ….Most of my ACCESS

Continued on page 10

Ahimsa & K-12 Education

friends experienced the sadness which came with feeling lonely."

In the digital stories, the girls proceed to express hope and strength through their cell phone classes. Munisa finds resilience in focusing on her lessons. Mehrangez gains motivation, embracing change. Mahina says her lessons "helped me to be brave, overcome my challenges and feel connected with other students." Sabohat shares, "I must not forget this. Never give up." Each of the girls embodies a more resilient self, awakening to her own inner strength, her soul-force revealed in the act of making her story heard.

Gandhi says of satyagraha that one's soul force must be "expressed in action in the service of social justice" (Sethia 2012 p. 47). In a Google Meet interview after the workshop, two of the five shared their future hopes and dreams. Mahina wants to "open a classroom in our school and teach what I have learned in this workshop." Munisa hopes to "share my ideas with students . . . to improve my English knowledge by teaching students."

Empowered by their identity as strong, resilient young women, the first five Tajik storytellers applied for and recently received an ACCESS Alumni Grant to share their learning by teaching girls and boys in their school.

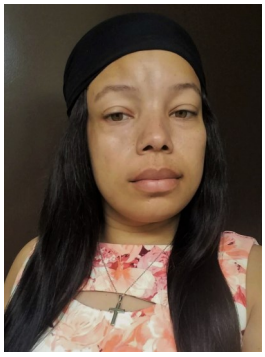
In a small way, this hybrid digital storytelling workshop attests to the power of digital connection in a socially-distanced world and to dreams that may be realized from sharing of authentic voices.

Jode Brexa *is an award-winning educational specialist, and global educator who facilitates grant-based Digital Storytelling projects to support women and youth in discovering their authentic voices. She lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.* For more visit www.jodebrexa.com

Ahimsa and the Pandemic of Racism

By L'aurelei Durr

We were in the middle of several crises in the year 2020—the global Covid-19 pandemic, the American presidential election, and the even farther and deeper-reaching pandemic of racism. This is not a new insight to recognize immense crises, for we have seen before similar struggles against inhumanity in the stories of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. However, now more than ever, we are exposed to injustice, police brutality, and senseless *himsa* (violence) at every click of a button.



However, we can also witness the way that people have been rising up against the injustice. I am fortunate to live and teach in the Bay Area. Oakland, California, has always been a hub of political activity and positioned at the center of the struggle for civil rights of Black people and other people of color. I am amazed at the resilience and organizing power of my community. There have been many examples of peaceful protests that have evoked Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha*, or truth force. People are speaking truth to power and practicing ahimsa, moving beyond a "passive resistance" to a strong and collective intentional nonviolent resistance. Thousands are holding firmly to the truth that Black Lives Matter. Countless protestors are risking their health to remind us of the concept of "Ubuntu" from South Africa, which recognizes that our well-being is tied to that of our brothers and sisters all over the world who are suffering injustice.

Experiencing and witnessing the fight for justice and the vast amount of human suffering makes me think of our responsibility to each other. I believe, and I'm sure others may agree, that forgetting our common humanity is at the root cause of violence in the world. In the middle of everything that is happening, we can still follow in Gandhi's footsteps with the intentional practice of ahimsa. Currently in America there are many noticeable divides along racial, political, and economic lines that cause both physical and psychological harm to people all over the nation. While the majority of the violence we see currently is a collective or institutional violence—inequity in schooling during Covid-19, police brutality, border patrolling—practicing ahimsa gives us some amount of individual choice and control. This individual action and transformation can spark a larger social transformation. As individuals, we can seek to understand others' perspectives and cultures and build bridges that connect us. We can promote unity and disrupt the violence in our immediate spheres of influence. We as a society cannot be

Continued on the Following page

our best selves unless we commit to recognizing the full humanity of others. In his ideas of ahimsa and satyagraha, Gandhi gave us a framework for this. If we truly want to pursue a more humanizing existence for all, we are called to consciously practice nonviolence while seeking to educate ourselves and others about injustice and turning toward the path to reconciliation.

L'aurelei Durr *is a 2015 Ahimsa fellow. She is passionate about promoting equity for all students through culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices. She teaches in Oakland, California .*

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. "

—**Arundhati Roy**, "The Pandemic is a Portal," *The Financial Times* (UK) , 3 April 2020.

My New, Yet Temporary, Reality

By Keshia Stiles

Each weekday morning, I wake up and prepare myself for a day of virtual teaching. However, a large piece of my routine has changed due to the pandemic that shut schools down on

While I still get ready the same way, what awaits me at school is very different. Instead of walking onto a bustling campus of teachers and students making their way to class before the final bell, I walk onto a deserted campus. Instead of greeting a room full of smiling faces, I am greeted by a wall of black, muted squares. Instead of feeling the love and laughter and learning inside my four walls, I try to engage the black squares of silence while begging students to acknowledge my existence. And, instead of leaving my classroom satisfied that lightbulb moments happened and that I am in the right place, I try not to collapse under the weight of the crushing loneliness and emptiness of what my day has become as I leave with the setting sun.

Teaching is hard work during even in normal times. We pour ourselves into our classrooms ten months a year and then plan over the summer because we love what we do. We love our students. We love our schools. We love our communities. But these are not normal times. And teaching virtually, despite the various claims by parents and media, is not any easier behind a screen. Even as I sit here thinking about how I can't imagine being anything other than a teacher, I feel my candle burning low, and I am not sure how much longer I have until I burn out.

The solution to this problem is the magical "self-care" mantra that has been flooding the schools and media. If I simply find time to get a pedicure or have a glass of wine, then my candle will be magically renewed, right? I will no longer feel the crushing weight of additional requirements and responsibilities the district is piling on top of an already teetering workload. I will no longer hear the disdain and hatred coming from parents and the media in online comments or in the grocery store check-out lines. I will no longer feel like crawling into bed and sleeping forever. Right? Of course not.

Self-care is not a magical cure that will set teachers, doctors, nurses, and other essential workers free. However, it is a small step in the right direction to finding reprieve from this new, yet temporary, reality. I find myself thinking back to my time with my fellow *ahimsakas* a few summers ago, and I am reminded that true self-care begins within.

A deep, slow breath. In. A moment where I silence my mind, my fears, my heart. Out. A moment where I focus only on my breath. In. Out. A moment where I find that inner stead-iness that has been buried under my day-to-day stresses. In that moment, I find strength to continue being who my students need me to be.

Though I feel the weight of this pandemic, I know my students are drowning under invisible, and unfortunately not-so-invisible, stressers, so I will find time to steady myself because I know they need me. Though I will not be a martyr, I also will not abandon the black empty squares that depend on me.

In the spirit of ahimsa, by finding moments to breathe, I will continue to practice nonviolence and to create the nurturing community that my students need and deserve.

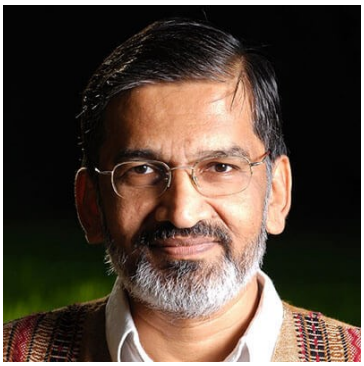
Keshia Stiles *is an 8th-grade self-contained teacher in the San Joaquin County of California. She is a 2015 Ahimsa Fellow.*

Ahimsa and Community

Faced with the Crisis: **What Would Gandhi Do?**

By Dr. Abhay Bang

The current global crisis is multi-layered: the pandemic, economic recession, global warming, compounded by the void of political and moral leadership. Faced with the present crisis, what would Gandhi do?



His solutions would have some common features. First, he would not merely preach, he would practice first. That's why he could make that audacious statement: "My life is my message". Second, he would begin action locally, not chase the world to change it. Third, he would begin with actions which initially would look small and silly but would ultimately be consequential. Picking a fistful of salt, for example, that eventually changed the course of history.

What would Gandhi do? This is a thought experiment. It yields a nine-point action program.

1. **Freedom from Fear.** We are gripped more by the virus of fear than by the Coronavirus. Fear of the pandemic has paralyzed the whole world. Gandhi would ask us to first shed this fear as he asked the Indians to shed the fear of the British. Instead act.

2. Care for the Sick. This was Gandhi's natural instinct. He expressed it on innumerable occasions, such as the Boer War, World War I, the epidemics in India, and nursing the sick, including the leprosy patient. Today millions of people infected with Covid-19 need nursing and care. Gandhi would personally nurse them. He would be fastidious about practicing hygiene, cleaning, hand washing and using masks. Since medical science does not have a single proven treatment for the Corona virus, Gandhi would use Nature-Cure, letting the body recover with nature's healing power.

A large number of patients with other illnesses too need medical care but are currently unattended because Covid-19 has crowded them out. The medical industry's monopoly over health care seems to have failed us. Gandhi would recommend healthy lifestyle, self-care and care for the community.

3. New Dandi March. Gandhi's talisman is amazing. It guides us to our duty of helping the most helpless and wretched human being we encountered. It makes our response quick and intuitive so that it is specific to individual. That one person, the symbol of the whole humanity, is our duty.

The displaced urban laborers—hungry and humiliated, walking towards their villages they had once left and risking death before returning—would unquestionably be the type of people Gandhi had in mind when giving his talisman. And he had enough knowledge about their misery from his last days spent among the millions of displaced victims of the Partition. Gandhi would rush to them. He would arrange for food, shelter, medicines, but most importantly, he would help preserve their dignity and hope. And finally, he would join these walking bands of displaced laborers forging unity with them and protesting government apathy and irresponsibility. That would be his New Dandi March.

4. Inter-faith and Social Unity. This was the last but incomplete cause of his life. He was deeply wounded by Hindus and Muslims turning against each other with hatred and violence that led to the partition of India. When the Coronavirus was knocking on India's doors, the leaders were busy stoking communal hatred. Then, they blamed one religious sect for the spread of the infection. This communal division would be the foremost cause for Gandhi. He would try to unite Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Untouchables and Tribals by himself living in their colonies, serving the sick among them, and sending them as volunteers to serve in each others areas even if such efforts to unite would risk his second assassination.

5. My Neighborhood is My Responsibility. Fear of Corona and the strict lockdown have forced people to shut their doors and shun any contact with neighbors. Gandhi would not approve of this. Instead, he would take the responsibility for neighbors, regarding this *swa-dharama*, his duty to love and serve them, especially during this crisis. How can there be a neighborhood without contact, and a community without neighborhood? I suspect, Gandhi would even go to the extent of launching a *satyagraha* or nonviolent civil disobedience by challenging the ghettoes created by the lockdown.

It would take a Gandhi to uphold such a moral position. And when he does that, the veil would be lifted for us to see the depth of alienation this pandemic and fear have led us to. It has made everyone an untouchable!

6. Himalayan Blunder. Gandhi would be truthful, ready to accept his mistakes. He had the courage to admit that he committed a Himalayan Blunder in launching a national movement in 1920s against the British, believing that India was ready to practice non-violence. India was not. He owned it as his error of judgement and withdrew the non-cooperation movement. Faced with the pandemic the global and national leaderships have committed several blunders, changed the goalpost repeatedly–from no infection, to containment, to increasing the doubling time, to now, learning to live with the Coronavirus. In the face of lack of knowledge, the errors of judgement are natural, but where is the honest admission of failure of the chosen strategy? It is missing. Gandhi would not hesitate to acknowledge failure. And, surprisingly, that would make people trust him only more.

7. Gram-Swaraj: The Economy of Small Scale. In the past twelve years, from the recession of 2008 to the economic crisis of 2020, we have seen that a globalized economy is too fragile. It crumbles in the face of local tremors like the real estate scam in the US or the emergence of a new virus in Wuhan. Gandhi would remind us of the humane stability of local production, local consumption and local community of relationships. He called it Gram-Swaraj which would be accompanied by the decentralization of political power. Globalization has produced authoritarian political leaders everywhere. For Gandhi, true democracy can be better practiced locally.

8. There is enough on this Earth: "But what about our needs?" Some modern consumers of the giant global production system would ask. Gandhi would explain: the unlimited desire to consume, the insatiable demands to satisfy sensory pleasures are not real needs but habits artificially implanted in human mind. "There is enough on this Earth for every body's need, but not for any one's greed." Gandhi would lead us to the ability to discriminate between need and greed. Limiting our greed would reduce excessive production and unnecessary consumption. Curtailing unnecessary travel would start clearing the smoke and the dust from the environment. Skies and rivers would become clean and blue. The global warming would start receding. Life would become peaceful. We will realize that we can live happily without excesses of modernity.

9. Prayer. The last act would be prayer. At the end of each day, after we have made our best efforts to address the crises at hand and completely exhausted our options and energy, we can sit quiet, reflect and submit ourselves. Submit to whom? That would be our choice. Submit to God, to Life, to Nature, to Truth, to History. For carrying the burden would make us like a donkey. Instead, we can recognize the tininess of our efforts in this infinite cosmos and leave the rest to the cosmic force.

We should not be waiting for Gandhi. We should be acting on what he would have done.

Dr. Abhay Bang *grew in Gandhi's Sevagram Ashram. He was inspired by the social ideals, and trained in India (MD) and at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, (MPH). He is recipient of numerous honors and awards for his work. Along with his wife Dr. Rani Bang, he founded the voluntary organistion, SEARCH, (Society for Education, Action and Research in Community Health) in one of the most underdeveloped districts, Gadchiroli, in Maharashtra, India, where they have been working with the people in 150 villages to provide community-based health care. Drs. Bang have developed village healthcare program which has now become a nationally and internationally recognized model .*

Gandhi's Talisman

"Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest 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 gain by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away."

OnTrue Friendship

By JamesTepfer, Ph.D.

Gandhi once commented that the notion of "best friends" was somewhat suspect. Special friendships, like most unique relationships, tend to reduce themselves to the lowest common denominator. The first victim in the devolution of an initially meaningful bond of friendship is truth. Candor is gradually

Continued on page 14

Ahimsa and Community

lost due to the fear of hurt feelings and the prospect of losing an intimate companion over telling unpleasant truths. Alas, loyalty to truth is all too easily replaced by quasi-mindless loyalty to a person. For this reason, Gandhi felt that it is better to try and befriend everyone one encounters in daily life than to cultivate a "best friend."

The British psychiatrist, Garth Wood, similarly noted in his controversial book, *The Myth of Neurosis*, that the most effective therapy for most people is "moral therapy." He argued that there are only two authentic forms of psychosis that require the help of a psychiatrist: schizophrenia and manic depression. Beyond that, most felt needs for therapy arise out of the normal challenges of living and are usually best solved by consulting someone that one knows and trusts. Such a person can be a "true friend" without necessarily being a "best friend." Wood characterized a "true friend" as one who has earned our confidence and can be fearlessly truthful when needed. Such moral forthrightness is an act of love and is the opposite of "enabling," i.e., indulging rationalizations and excuses for wrong actions.

"When your spirits need a lift, think of the virtues and talents of those around you—one's energy, another's modesty, the generosity of a third, something else in a fourth. Nothing is so inspiring and uplifting as the sight of these splendid qualities in our friends. Keep them always in mind."

—Marcus Aurelius

The Greek sage, Pythagoras, setsout in his *Golden Verses*, the wise pre-conditions for friendship. He holds that the basis of all friendship is virtue or character – not shared beliefs, personal charisma nor popularity. Virtue, in a Pythagorean sense, is strength of character, the knowledge and power to act justly, with self-restraint and with consummate kindness. When we genuinely admire a person of virtue, we are in actuality "participating" -- to some degree -- in the supernal qualities of that individual. A virtuous person inspires us, and we conceive a wish to emulate them, to reshape our personality until it is worthy of right relationship with the luminous divine in them as well as within ourselves.

Pythagoras (and Gandhi too) encourage us to not only befriend and emulate the worthy, but to beware of spurning them for slight faults. While we can visualize perfection – especially moral perfection – we live in an imperfect world. Faults and mistakes are intrinsic to growth as is self-correction. Thus, it is better to think in terms of perfectibility rather than perfection. For that reason, perceived mistakes, or even minor character flaws of those we befriend become an opportunity for learning, not for judging or "sitting in the seat of scorners."

A true friend, then, is anyone and everyone that is worthy of spiritual and moral admiration.

They are those heroic individuals who Pythagoras celebrates as "full of goodness and light." We might never personally know these heroes and heroines of the heart. They might be historical figures like Lincoln, Gandhi, and Anne Frank. Or. they might be inspiring legendary figures such as Rama of the *Ramayana* or King Arthur of the Round Table. No matter.

Once we invite the virtuous into the welcoming cathedral of our mind, they can become "the best of friends" to us.

James Tepfer *received his doctorate in political philosophy from the university of California, Santa Barbara. He taught philosophy for twenty years at Oxnard College. He has a life-long love of Gandhi's teachings and has given talks on his philosophy.*

The Year 2020: Reflections

By Dr. Malathi Narayan

2020 was a challenging year for all of

us, in so many ways! The sudden onslaught of the pandemic engulfed the world affecting people in multiple ways. The US has witnessed highest numbers of infections and death. The pandemic is changing the very face of my home country, India! The drama and the anxiety over the elections here in the US have consumed us all. I hope this will come to a close soon.

At a personal level, the year has been okay for me and my family here and in India. The year started off well and happy with a family get-together in Hyderabad to celebrate a nephew's wedding. After the celebrations, everyone returned rto their respective destinations just as the pandemic was breaking out.

Continued on the following page

We have stayed healthy. The children seem to be coping too. The Senior Residence facility we moved into three years ago, has done a very good job with screening, testing etc. to keep us free from the COVID-19 virus. We have also been spared the social isolation with resumption of many activities here (socially distanced and masked). Our weekly dinners with our son are of course on hold!

The world as we have known it has changed, as it has done with past pandemics. But I am optimistic and hopeful, with the remarkably rapid availability of the vaccines, that we will be able to get back to our social interaction and shared meals in a few months. I fantasize that we will all be humbled by what we have gone through, and emerge from this experience as a more kind, caring people! Let us wish and hope the year 2021 will bring happiness, good health, and peace to all.

Malathi Narayan *is a retired medical doctor. She, along with her husband, Dr. Shankar Narayan, lives in a Senior Residence Facility in the Bay area. Drs. Narayan are sustaining sponsors of the Ahimsa Center.*

Svādhyāya: A Religious Response to COVID-19

By Shivani Bothra, Ph.D.

This article considers how an established traditional practice of reading scriptures transforms challenges into opportunities in paving the path of *ahimsa*.

Faced with the coronavirus pandemic, the Indian government imposed a strict lockdown during which all public places like cinemas, theatres and malls were closed, and people were prohibited from leaving their homes. Places of religious worship too were closed and there were limitations on public gatherings at community centers. These restrictions continued long after the strict lockdown was lifted. As a result, Jain monks and nuns were not only restricted in their movement, but their interactions with the lay community also decreased.

Being confined to one place provided an opportunity to engage in *svādhyāya*, the principle of self-study.

Turning to reading as well as to various forms of contemplative and introspective practices served as a safe and constructive response to the pandemic. A Jain nun in India, noted:

"The coronavirus pandemic provided us with substantial time to deeply engage in Jain scriptures, to revise what has been read before, hold uninterrupted discussions on spiritual topics, and above all, focus on mantra-chanting and meditation."

The nun's words indicate useful engagement of the time that would have been otherwise occupied in customary duties of moving from one place to another together with ever-increasing interactions with laity.

Similarly, lay community embraced svadhyaya in a variety of ways and technology further mobilized new arenas of learning that enhanced the religious experiences. Various workshops conducted on Zoom and reading material provided on WhatsApp enabled the understanding of scriptures, reciting of prayers, chanting of *mantras* and giving exams to evaluate one's learning.

Deprived of human interaction, as well as being confined to constricted spaces for long durations, resulted in boredom as well as depression – both of which inflict pain (*himsa*) on oneself and create a painful environment for others.

For the laity, to resort to svadhyaya instead of engagement with the social media or popular mass media, to a large extent, displayed a resort to dealing with a stress which, in many societies, was witnessed as engaging with psychological counselors.

Regardless of mendicant groups or laity, svadhyaya received unparalleled attention. Therefore, it is even more important to bring out the resort to focused religious reading in context to the pandemic. Firstly, studies have shown that the practice of meditation and chanting clears one's mind of delusion and develop compassion toward all sentient beings. Secondly, lay practitioners went beyond material offerings in the temples to think of alternative ways of religious practices. Such restrictions reduced individual's carbon footprint, eventually leading to a nonviolent way of living. Thirdly, Jain tradition believes that understanding the essence of scriptures and embodying the same leads to ahimsa as a way of life. This brief analysis shows that, despite the setbacks of the pandemic, it was an opportunity for the Jain religious community to immerse in the practice of svadhyaya including meditation and contemplative introspection.

Shivani Bothra *is Bhagwaan Mahavir/Chao Family Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in Jain Studies at Rice University. The main themes of her research have been migration, religious education, curricula, and gender roles. Dr. Bothra's current research focuses largely on the religious education in the US in the context of keeping the Jain tradition alive outside India—the original homeland.*

ABOUT THE AHIMSA CENTER

Established in 2003-04 in the College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, the Ahimsa Center is focused on interdisciplinary teaching and learning about nonviolence and its practical applications at personal, interpersonal, societal, national, and international levels. Educational and outreach initiatives of the Center facilitate an understanding of ahimsa as a positive force informing the ways of thinking as well as living.

The Center provides an institutional forum to innovatively serve and foster synergistic interactions among many important stakeholders in higher education, K-12 education, & community at large.

Educational initiatives of the Center, such as the interdisciplinary Minor in Nonviolence Studies on our campus, help students understand nonviolence and nonviolent social change at intellectual and practical levels and in a global context.

To integrate in the K-12 curricula an interdisciplinary understanding of nonviolence and nonviolent social change, the Center has launched a fellowship program for the K-12 educators and offers summer institutions for them. Finally, for the benefits of the larger community, the Center organizes conferences, symposia, lectures, dialogues, workshops, and special events focusing on a deeper understanding of nonviolence as a way of life.

The Center is playing a pioneering role by fostering a vision in which each individual is an important player in the building and sustaining a culture of nonviolence. It is a vision for cooperation and collaboration among fellow human beings on the basis of mutual respect, trust, and self restraint. It is a vision where one sees that any violence inflicted on others is, first and foremost, a violence inflicted on oneself.

Ahimsa Center

California State Polytechnic University

Pomona, CA 91768

Director: Dr. Tara Sethia

(909) 869-3868/tsethia@cpp.edu

UPCOMING EVENTS: MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Details will be posted at www.cpp.edu/ahimsacenter

February 19, 2021 **5:00-6:15 pm PST**	**Ahimsa Center Celebration** to mark the establishment of Ahimsa Center Endowment for Shri Shantinath Chair in Ahimsa Studies
February 21, 2021 **10:00-11:15 am PST**	**Satish Kumar,** Emeritus Director, Schumacher College, UK. He will speak on: "Ahimsa: A Way of Life"
March 22, 12021 **1:00-2:15 pm PST**	**Ana Bajželj,** Shrimad Rajchandra Endowed Chair in Jain Studies, University of California, Riverside. She will speak on: "Nonviolence and Bioethics: Jain Approaches to Ethical Dilemmas of Birth, Life, & Death"
April 7, 2021 **1:00-2:15 pm PST**	**Andrew Moss,** Emeritus Professor of English, Cal Poly Pomona. He will speak on: "Ahimsa, Labor, and the Struggle for Economic Justice"
May 3, 2021 **1:00-2:15 pm PST**	**Randall Amster,** Co-Director & Teaching Professor, Environmental Studies, Georgetown University. He will speak on: "Digital Nonviolence"