

The Bodhisattva in the Desert: *Ahimsa* in the Desert Fathers,¹ a Meditation²

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I would even make bold to say that the future progress of one's own cherished faith even within one's own community depends more largely than most of us have realized on the ability to solve the question of comparative religion. . . . [U]nless, I say, we can together solve the intellectual and spiritual questions posed by comparative religion, then I do not see how a [person] is to be a Christian or a Muslim or a Buddhist at all.

—Wilfred Cantwell Smith³

“We are all patients”: Himsa, Ahimsa, and the Passions

WHILE INCARCERATED BY the British in the 1920s, Mohandas Gandhi wrote his *Autobiography*. Having lived, though at a distance, the hor-

1. I presented a different version of this essay at the fourteenth annual St. Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society conference at UCLA on July 14, 2012. I wish to thank attendees for their generous comments. I presented an early draft in a colloquium to colleagues and students in Philosophy and Religious Studies at CSU Bakersfield; my thanks to them for their comments and suggestions. I wish also to thank Profs. Gary E. Kessler and Jeffrey Burton Russell for reading an early draft, Fr. Mark Scott for his editorial watchfulness, and the anonymous reader for CSQ for his or her comments and suggestions.

2. I wish to thank Prof. Jason Zaborowski for reminding me that I had had “A Meditation” in an earlier draft.

3. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991 [1962]) 11.

rors of World War I, Gandhi seemed to foresee the even worse terrors of World War II and weave those twin self-inflicted catastrophes into a metaphysic:

ahimsa is a comprehensive principle. We are helpless mortals caught in the conflagration of *himsa*. . . . Man cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward *himsa*. The very fact of his living—eating, drinking, and moving about—necessarily involves some *himsa*, destruction of life, be it ever so minute. A votary of *ahimsa* therefore remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of *himsa*. He will be constantly growing in self-restraint and compassion, but he can never become entirely free from outward *himsa*.⁴

That's as honest as it gets. Gandhi accepts our human situation and then tells us to get off our butts and do something about it. No despair; no false hope; no denial. Grounding ourselves in the here-and-now instead of reserving angels' wings for a future flight.

Ahimsa is the Sanskrit term meaning non-injury, desiring to do no harm. *Himsa*, its opposite, means violence or the committing of violence.⁵ What Gandhi is describing here is the original sin of reality. Or, better, the original reality of reality: *ahimsa* and *himsa* are twins conjoined from birth and represent what earthly reality often is. One scholar, Hope Fitz, in speaking about Gandhi, says, "I am convinced that if world peace and a sense of individual well-being are to be realized, *ahimsa* must be taught to and practiced by the people of the world, especially the children."⁶ What we need is a second Children's Crusade—but this one, unlike the first, for peaceful purposes.⁷ For *ahimsa* to be a world-perspective, Fitz

4. M. K. Gandhi, *Gandhi's Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs, 1960) 427.

5. The spellings of *ahimsa* and *himsa* are *ahiṃsā* and *hiṃsā*, but for this paper, even in quotations, I've omitted the diacritical marks.

6. Hope K. Fitz, "Ahimsa: A Way of Life; a Path to Peace," Gandhi Lecture Series, Dartmouth Center for Indic Studies 1 (Dartmouth: U of Massachusetts, 2007) 1–131; http://www.umassd.edu/media/umassdartmouth/centerforindicstudies/gandhibooklet_2006.pdf 1.

7. The disastrous Children's Crusade took place in 1212, eight years after the Fourth Crusade; see "Children's Crusade," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983) 274b–75a.

continues, “we need to loosen it from its Indic [that is, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain] moorings.”⁸

Continuing with Fitz’s metaphor, perhaps what we need to do is not so much unmoor *ahimsa* from India and her religions but rather to moor it to the three largest Western religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. By *mooring* I do not mean that we are offloading Indian religious concepts and values and selling them cheap in Saturday flea markets; rather, I wish to show that *ahimsa*, in deed if not in word, is indigenous also to Western religion.

The Buddha understands that suffering is ubiquitous, and Gandhi realizes that *himsa*, far from being a theological or philosophical abstraction, comprises, with *ahimsa*, reality itself. *Karma* is the scoreboard, as it were, that records the sempiternal wrestling match between *himsa* and *ahimsa*. The Jains of India have got it right—at least, for a non-Jain, metaphorically: for them karma “is material in nature and its particles become attached to *jivas* [souls] any time they do anything. Some actions produce a greater amount of karma than others. . . . The soul becomes darker and heavier the more karma particles it accumulates, sinking, eventually, to the very bottom of the universe.”⁹

Using a different metaphor, Abba Isaiah of Scetis, the fifth-century Egyptian monk and renowned author of spiritual counsel, agrees with Buddha and Gandhi: “We are all as if in surgery. One has a pain in the eye, another in the hand, a third in the veins, and whatever other diseases exist.”¹⁰ Yet Isaiah’s surgery is not a posh and private seaside recovery center for movie stars and celebrities; it’s a county hospital whose emergency room is open 24/7; after nightfall the cries and whispers from those with GSWs and stab wounds haunt the rooms and hallways.¹¹

The journey from *himsa* to *ahimsa*, then, is both individual and communal. No one climbs the highest mountains alone, or lies in the hospital unaided. Isaiah understands—“We are *all* as if in surgery”—and we *don’t*

8. Fitz 1.

9. Gary E. Kessler, *Studying Religion: An Introduction through Cases*, 3rd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008) 205. See Paul Dundas, *The Jains*, The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

10. Abba Isaiah, *Ascetic Discourse 8*, *Abba Isaiah of Scetis: Ascetic Discourses*, trans. John Chryssavgis and Pachomios (Robert) Penkett, CS 150 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2002) 92–93; on Isaiah, a fourth/fifth-century monk (or composite), see CS 150:16–20.

11. [GSW=gunshot wound.—Ed.]

comprehend, at least most of the time, that theologically and anthropologically, we are *all* at County; swanky recovery resorts are fantasies for those in denial. “Since those in surgery have different illnesses,” Isaiah continues, “if someone cries in pain with regard to his own suffering, let no one else ask, ‘Why are you crying out?’ Is not each one concerned with his own pain?”

Isaiah is *not* saying that we should have no empathy or compassion for our fellow-sufferers—the desert monks nurture compassion out of aridity; he’s urging us not to worry about others’ *sins*, their diseases, dis-eases, dysfunctions, and wrong-doings: “Therefore, if the pain of my own sin is before me,” Isaiah continues, “I would not look at the sin of another.” When hospital staff are wheeling you into your room at County, Isaiah would say today, don’t worry why two cops are standing outside your neighbor’s door. For, he concludes, “everyone who lies in surgery observes the precautions of his own doctor.” This desert *abba* realizes that we’re all patients. Though this great monk has neither the etymology nor the metaphor, as a spiritual guide he understands that *patient* and *passions* (as in the seducing, beguiling, and distracting passions so thoroughly studied and treated by the early desert monks) are twin siblings birthed from the Latin *patior*, “to suffer.” Buddha nods in agreement: *all* the passions, treatable in the spiritual surgery, are suffering: for ourselves, and for those whom we harm because of our passions.

Evagrius and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the Passions

EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS (346–399), that most metaphysical, yet practical, of the desert fathers and mothers, writes, as it were, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) for the monks and spiritual sojourners of his and future generations.¹² His “Concerning the Eight Thoughts” (*Praktikos* 15–39) acts as an introduction.¹³ The eight

12. DSM-II: <http://libweb.uoregon.edu/index/cms-filesystem-action/=guides/english/dsm.pdf>; DSM-IV: http://www.amazon.com/dp/08904200254/?tag=googhydr-20@hvadid=24624725265&hpos=1t1&hvexid=&hvnetw=g&hvrnd=8201175341488606212&hvpone=9.1@hvptwo=25&hvtmt=b&ref=pd_sl_4gng3hdeov_b.

13. Evagrius, *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger, CS 4 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1981). Evagrius, “Against the Eight Passionate Thoughts,” CS 4:20. The Greek

thoughts (*logismoí*) are gluttony, impurity (sexual immorality), avarice (love of money), sadness, anger, acedia (spiritual doldrums), vainglory, and pride.¹⁴ As Evagrius makes clear, demons influence human beings through these *logismoí*: “The demon of sexual immorality compels desiring for different bodies.”¹⁵

Demons are the lords of misrule over humans because they preside “over the passions of the soul,” and this malign suzerainty persists until death.¹⁶ Passion and the passions (*páthos*; pl. *páthē*) are difficult terms for us today to understand in their original monastic contexts.¹⁷ The original meaning of *páthos* was anything that befalls a person, an incident, an accident; such befalling can be either positive or negative, so *páthos* came to mean experience, suffering, then a state or condition.¹⁸ The connection here with the incessant suffering posited by the Buddha is enlightening; since human beings are always experiencing, even in sleep, we do so within Gandhi’s cosmos where *himsa* surrounds, besieges, and assaults us. The New Testament, however, pointedly distinguishes between unwilling and willed suffering: *pathēmata*, sufferings, are sufferings or misfortunes;¹⁹ *páthē*, though, passions, are always bad, and always *willed*:

- “with lustful passion” [*páthos*]—like the Gentiles! (1 Th 4:5).
- “fornication, impurity, passion [*páthos*], evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)” (Col 3:5).
- “degrading [or disgraceful] passions” [*páthē*] (Rom 1:26).

has simply “Concerning the Eight Thoughts.” Dysinger has “Concerning the Eight [Tempting-] Thoughts” (Evagrius, *The Praktikos*, ed. and trans. Luke Dysinger, Greek text and English trans., <http://www.scribd.com/doc/22486786/evagrius-Praktikos>).

14. On thoughts, see Tim Vivian, *Words to Live By: Journeys in Ancient and Modern Egyptian Monasticism*, CS 207 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2005) 5–21; Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 6; CS 4:16–17; Evagrius, “The Eight Kinds of Evil Thoughts,” *Praktikos* 6–14; CS 4:16–20. For “impurity,” *porneia*, Dysinger has “sexual immorality,” which is better, and for “avarice,” “love of money.” And who uses “vainglory” anymore? A few synonyms suggested by Thesaurus.com (<http://thesaurus.com/browse/vainglory>): arrogance, boastfulness, egocentricity, haughtiness, insolence, megalomania, and self-importance.

15. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 8; Dysinger. On Evagrius and the demons, see David Brakke, *Evagrius of Pontus: Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons*, CS 229 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2009).

16. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 36; Dysinger.

17. See Evagrius, *Praktikos* 34–39, “On Passions.”

18. From *páschō*, to suffer. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, rev. Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 1285a. Hereafter LSJ.

19. Rom 8:18: “the sufferings [*pathēmata*] of the present time”; 2 Cor 1:5: “the sufferings [*pathēmata*] of Christ.”

When the early desert fathers and mothers speak of passions they're not talking about friends they'd invite over for a drink but rather about the highwaymen, muggers, thieves, and rapists of the soul, denizens we let loose on ourselves and others. Passions, whether willed or unwilled, are, literally and more seriously than the use of the word today, distractions: they are tractors driven by the demons or the Devil himself that drag us, complicit or kicking and screaming, away from God.²⁰ Evagrius offers other metaphors: "It is not possible [for] one who is chained to run; nor is it possible for the *nous* [mind] to see the place of spiritual prayer while enslaved to passions [*páthesi*], for it is carried to and fro by impassioned [*empathoús*] thought and can have no firm standing place."²¹

Nevertheless, as for the Buddha, as for Gandhi, as for Antony,²² so for Evagrius all is not lost: one can practice the *dharma*; one can, "if the spring of all his actions is compassion," remain "true to his faith"; one can fight the demons—and win. As Evagrius so acutely reminds us, "Whether these thoughts are able to disturb the soul or not is not up to us; but whether they linger or not, and whether they arouse passions or not; that is up to us."²³ If we pursue the medical analogy, the desert abbas and ammas as physicians—or psychiatrists and therapists—offer antidotes to the

20. "Distraction" < Lat. *traho* (to drag or pull), whose past participle is *tractum*, whence tractor. Whether or not the ancients understood demons and the Devil literally or metaphorically is not at issue here; what matters is the *reality*.

21. Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer* 72; Dysinger. See CS 4:66–67. A Stoic approach to the passions, which Evagrius inherited along with his Platonism, may lie even closer to a Buddhist/Hindu view that the passions arise from false (mis-)judgments. I wish to thank the anonymous reader of this paper for pointing this out. For further discussion, see Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: from Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000). As Columba Stewart has observed, "Evagrius seems to have been fascinated by the idea of a 'unified theory of everything' that would offer a theologically and philosophically compelling vision of human existence"; see Stewart, "Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9.2 (2001): 173–204 (online: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_early_christian_studies/v009/9.2_stewart.pdf). See 191–98 for Evagrius's "goal" "that we ourselves go to God in prayer without any notion of form (*amorphía*), immaterial and dispossessed, in the surrender of all hope of sensory perception (*enaisthēsia*)."

22. See Athanasius, *Vita Anton* 16–43 (although it is not clear how much of this discourse is Antonian and how much Athanasian); Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis, *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life*, CS 202 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2003), and the *Letters, Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of A Saint*, ed. Samuel Rubenson, *Studies in Antiquity & Christianity* (New York: Trinity, 1998).

23. *Praktikos* 6; Dysinger. Perhaps this is the context in which to consider what Jesus says in Mt 5: 27–28: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

passions. *Praktikos* 15–33, providing “[Tactics] for the Eight [Tempting] Thoughts,” offers these virtues in Chapter 15:

The wandering *nous* (mind) is stabilized by

1. reading,
2. vigils, and
3. prayer.

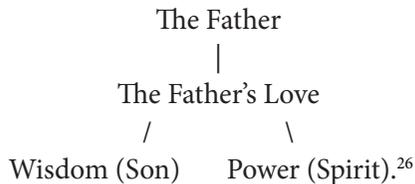
Burning *epithumía* (desire) is quenched by

1. hunger,
2. toil, and
3. solitude.

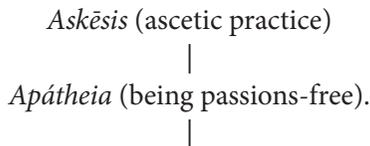
Churning *thumós* (indignation) is calmed by

1. the singing of Psalms,
2. patient endurance, and
3. mercy.²⁴

Praktikos 40–56 then goes on to offer “Instructions” on how to put the tools listed above to use. In *Praktikos* 63–90 Evagrius declares that “the ascetic life [*praktikē*] is the spiritual method for cleansing the affective part of the soul,” or, translated differently, “Ascetical practice is a spiritual method purifying the passionate part [*to pathetikón*] of the soul.”²⁵ The passionate part (*pathetikón*), in the early monastic sense, is pathetic in the modern sense. Because this is so, Evagrius thus offers a counter-genealogy of redemption:



The Son and the Spirit in turn guide *praktikē*, the ascetic life or practice (or both):



24. *Praktikos*; Dysinger.

25. *Praktikos* 78; CS 4:36; Dysinger.

26. Evagrius, *The Great Letter* 12; A. M. Casiday, *Evagrius, The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 2006) 67.

*Agápē*²⁷

EVAGRIUS DEVOTES ABOUT twenty-five percent of the *Praktikos* to two sections near the end: “The State approaching Apatheia” (57–62) and “Concerning the Signs of Apatheia” (63–90).²⁸ *Apátēia*, being free of the distracting and even debilitating passions, requires, as the *Praktikos* takes pains to demonstrate, hard work (*áskēsis*) or, in theological terms, cooperative grace, God and the ascetic working together. *Sunergeía*, “working with, cooperation, assistance, help,” between God and humans and among persons has a strong history in early Christianity, beginning with the New Testament:

- Christians are called to work with one another (1 Cor 16:16; James 2:22) and with God: “And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them [*sunergóúntos*] and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it” (Mk 16:20).
- “As we work together [*sunergóúntes*] with him,* we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor 6:1).
- “We know that all things work together [*sunergeí*] for good* for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).²⁹
- “You see that faith was active along with [*sunergeí*] his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works” (Jm 2:22).

The *Life of Antony* 10.1–3 offers one of the most striking examples of monastic synergy: When Antony emerges from his ascetic retreat in a tomb, battling the demons,

27. Love: “esteem, affection, regard, love”; *agapáō*: “to have a warm regard for and interest in another, cherish, have affection for, love.” In the New Testament, *agápē* reveals the relationship between God and Christ: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (Jn 15:10b); “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn 17:26). Jesus is God’s “beloved” (*agapētós*): Mt 3:17. See William F. Arnt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago & London: The U of Chicago P, 2000) 5a–6a, 6a–7a, and 7a–7b. Hereafter BAGD.

28. See Dysinger.

29. See *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G. W. H. Lampe (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961) 1323b, and BAGD 969a–b.

The Lord did not forget Antony's struggle [or: contest; *áthlēsis*] at that time, but came to his help. Looking up, Antony saw the roof appear to open and a beam of light descend on him. Suddenly the demons vanished and the pain in his body immediately ceased and his dwelling was once again whole. Antony perceived the Lord's help [*antílēpsis*],³⁰ and when he took a deep breath and realized that he had been relieved of his suffering, he entreated the vision that had appeared to him: "Where are you? Why did you not appear at the beginning so you could stop my sufferings?" And a voice came to him: "Antony, I was here, but I waited to see your struggle. And now, since you persevered and were not defeated, I will be a helper to you always and I will make you famous everywhere."³¹

Such synergy, cooperation, and working together with God, with God's help, both resultant and concomitant, can, Evagrius insists, bring one to *apátheia*, being without passions: "To drive away the [tempting-] thought of vainglory with humility, or the thought of sexual immorality with chastity would be a sign of the most profound *apátheia*."³² A simple description of Buddhist Enlightenment—"A person who has followed the arduous path [= *askēsis*, struggle, contest] to enlightenment . . . reaches the condition of awakening [= *apátheia*] when all veils of illusion are removed"³³—describes as well Evagrius's thinking and practice: "The soul possesses *apátheia* not when it is unmoved by matters, but when it remains undisturbed by the memory of them."³⁴ *Apátheia* brings the monk,

30. *Antílē(m)psis*, < *antilambánomai*, denotes "assisting, taking part, coming to the aid of, succor; devote oneself to; to be involved with something through close contact" (BAGD 89a, Lampe 155a).

31. One should not fear the potential for humor in this scene. Lest they take themselves too seriously, one of the dangers inherent to the spiritual life, the monks told humorous stories about themselves; see Olympius 2 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward, CS 59 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1975) 160–61: "Abba Olympius of the Cells was tempted to fornication. His thoughts said to him, 'Go, and take a wife.' He got up, found some mud, made a woman, and said to himself, 'Here is your wife. Now you must work hard in order to feed her.' So he worked, giving himself a great deal of trouble. The next day, making some mud again, he formed it into a girl and said to his thoughts, 'Your wife has had a child. You must work harder so you can feed her and clothe your child.' So he wore himself out doing this, and said to his thoughts, 'I cannot bear this weariness, stop wanting a wife!' God, seeing his efforts, took away the conflicts from him and he was at peace."

32. *Praktikos* 58; Dysinger.

33. *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, ed. Jonathan Z. Smith (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1995) 338b.

34. *Praktikos* 67; Dysinger.

Gandhi's "votary of *ahimsa*," potentially anyone, beyond the grasping coils and snares of *himsa*: "The perfect person [*téleios*] does not practise self-control, and one [who has attained] *apatheia* does not practise patient endurance, since endurance pertains to the vulnerable person and self-control to the troubled."³⁵

Téleios, 'perfect', without losing its sense of 'meeting the highest standard', also signifies here 'full-grown, mature, fully developed', even fully integrated.³⁶ *Bodhi*, 'awakening' in Pali-Sanskrit, also means 'understanding', the *gnōsis*, knowledge, of Origenist, and even pre-Origenist (Clement of Alexandria), Christian spirituality and mysticism.³⁷ Knowledge, awareness, understanding lie at the heart of Origenist-Antonian-Evagri-an desert spirituality, as Antony declares:

Truly, my beloved, *I write to you as wise persons* [sensible persons; 1 Cor 10:15], who are able to know themselves. The person who knows himself knows God, the person who knows God must worship him as is proper.

My beloved in the Lord, know yourselves!³⁸ Those who know themselves know their time, and those who know their time are able to stand upright without being moved by shifty tongues."³⁹

Such perfection, maturity, integration can bring one *hesychia* and, even, union with the Divine. Perfection, maturity, integration—enlightenment—require being attentive and keeping watch over what one does. In his farewell advice to his monks in *Life of Antony* 91.3, Antony, like Gandhi, focuses on the need for attentiveness: "You know that the demons are always hatching plots. You know how savage they are. But they

35. *Praktikos* 68; Dysinger.

36. See BAGD 995b–996a for New Testament examples.

37. See Rubenson, "IV: The Gnosis," 59–88, for a full discussion.

38. According to Pausanias (second-century AD), *Description of Greece* 10.24.1 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Paus.+10.24&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0160>), "Know yourself" was inscribed in the *pronaos* (forecourt) of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi.

39. Antony, Ep 4.15–16; Rubenson 211, slightly altered. On "time," see Antony, Epp 2.35; 3.32, 38, 48; 6.28, 39–40, 81, and 115, and Rubenson, "The Time in which We Are" (Rubenson 81–86): "Antony repeatedly implores his readers to recognize their own situation, to become aware of their time, to 'know how it is.' He vividly paints the image of the hour of decision, the *kairós*, with its tension between despair and agony in the face of impending judgement, and its joy and peace through liberation and restoration" (81–82).

are really weak and powerless. Therefore do not fear them but instead draw inspiration⁴⁰ from Christ and believe in him. And live as though you were going to die each day, attentively observing yourselves.”⁴¹ All analogues are partial, but I believe it is helpful to translate the early monastic *demons* and *passions* into Gandhi’s *himsa*. Gandhi, like Antony, stresses the importance of attentiveness, but he emphasizes, as it were, attentive *compassion*: “A votary of *ahimsa* therefore remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of *himsa*.”⁴²

“*Free at Last*”: Monastic *ahimsa*

FOR THE DESERT fathers and mothers, *ahimsa*, like its birth twin *himsa*, the passions, is almost never theoretical; it’s practical, with all of that word’s implications: practical, judicious, sensible; applied, real-world, hands-on, everyday; real, useful, concrete. *Ahimsa* is not only practical; it can become, as with Gandhi, practice, a practice, praxis. When an ascetic—in Greek, one who trains, which means, potentially, *any* person, but, sorrowfully, not *every* person—when an ascetic, Gandhi’s “votary,” practices *ahimsa*, this praxis becomes a way of being. Etymologically, *ahimsa*, not-violence, is a prison wall or armed guard that keeps the inmates from being banished to the hole or having time added to their sentences, the Negative Golden Rule: Don’t do to others what you don’t want done to you.⁴³ When put into practice, though, *ahimsa* becomes a vast gateway through the wall where all the guards, unarmed, and all the prisoners, unshackled, exit together, arm in arm, singing “Free at Last! Free at Last!

40. Gk: *anapnéete*, literally, breathe in.

41. Athanasius, *Vita Anton* 91.3; CS 202:251.

42. Gandhi 427. That “compassion” and “compassionate” do not occur in the *Life of Antony* demonstrates the limitations of analogy. One could, however, argue that the entire *Systematic Apophthegmata* stresses attentiveness. Chapter 13 of that collection is “One Must Joyfully Practice Hospitality and Show Compassion” (*The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers, the Systematic Collection*, trans. John Wortley, CS 240 [Collegeville, MN: Cistercian, 2012] 224–32).

43. See Tobit 4:15: “And what you hate, do not do to anyone.”

Thank God Almighty, free at last!”—the Golden Rule: Do to others what you would have them do to you.⁴⁴

But monastic *ahimsa* goes even further: it calls upon its practitioners to do to others not only what others might not do for them, but what others cannot even *imagine* doing—at least until they see it made flesh:

A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to him, “Come, for everyone is waiting for you.”

So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water, and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, “What is this, Father?”

The old man said to them, “My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another.”

When they heard that, they said no more to the brother but forgave him.⁴⁵

As the elder Zosimas points out in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “Remember particularly that you cannot be a judge of any one. For no one can judge a criminal, until he recognizes that he is just such a criminal as the man standing before him, and that he perhaps is more than all men to blame for that crime. When he understands that, he will be able to be a judge. Though that sounds absurd, it is true. If I had been righteous myself, perhaps there would have been no criminal standing before me.”⁴⁶

Monastic *ahimsa* and the monks who practice it stretch the soul’s imagination beyond imagining into practice, into being. Perhaps Abba

44. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream Speech”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3P6N9g-dQg>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJ6frC7hboc>. I owe the idea for this vision to the magnificent conclusion of Flannery O’Connor’s story “Revelation.” There are numerous editions of O’Connor’s stories; “Revelation” is also available on-line: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/30444531/Revelation-by-Flannery-O-Connor>.

45. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Moses 2; CS 59:138–39. John Dominic Crossan, *The Great-est Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord’s Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011) 161, asks, “Is it true that God will forgive us everything except our own unforgiveness? But of all the things for which we need forgiveness, we need it above all else for our lack of human forgiveness.”

46. Constance Garnett trans., Project Gutenberg, p. 357: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28054/28054-h/28054-h.html#toc97>.

Moses has Bible verses on his lips and in his heart when he tells his disciples, “Look, the barbarians are coming to Scetis today; get the hell out of here.”⁴⁷ When they ask him if he too will flee, he replies, “As for me, I’ve been waiting for this day for many years, that the word of Christ may be fulfilled which says, ‘All who take up the sword will perish by the sword.’”⁴⁸ So Moses, and six of his brethren, stay, and die. The word of Christ at first does not seem very apposite here—is Moses’ response a *non sequitur*, a koan, or idiocy?

Staying is *ahimsa*. Flight is *ahimsa*. And both are at once individual and communal. When barbarians invade Scetis, beating, destroying, and plundering, the monks “tearfully surround” Abba John the Little and ask, “Will you also leave, our father? Are you afraid of the barbarians?” John answers them:

By the name of Christ God, I am not afraid. No, the perfect goodness in God’s presence does not allow each of us to pursue his own salvation alone; instead, according to an angelic purpose, each of us, especially the devout person, performs all his deeds while regarding his own good and that of his brother equally. This barbarian, even if he is separated from me by faith, nevertheless is an image and creature of God in the same way that I am. If I resist this barbarian he will kill me and will go to punishment on my account.⁴⁹

Confronted with the devouring face of *himsa*—vividly pictured in the Dementors of *Harry Potter*—to flee is *ahimsa* and to stay, non-violently, is also *ahimsa*.⁵⁰ Monks like Moses and John have redefined our quotidian reality; what they say—and live out—critiques and bears witness against our bloodthirsty yet banal desire for wars and rumors of war. The stories that the ammas and abbas of Late Antiquity have bequeathed us do not merely lie a-moldering like John Brown’s body; their souls go marching on.⁵¹ They’ve found life, then death, then resurrected life in the lives and deaths of such modern monastics as the Cistercian “martyrs

47. See *Alphabetical Apophthegmata*, Moses 10.

48. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Moses 10; CS 59:140; Mt 26:52.

49. *The Holy Workshop of Virtue: The Life of Saint John the Little*, trans. Maged S. A. Mikhail and Tim Vivian, CS 234 (Collegetown, MN: Cistercian, 2010) 247–248.

50. Dementors are soul-sucking ghouls who guard the Prison of Azkaban. They also exhale misery, so gloom surrounds them whenever they are present (<http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Dementor>).

51. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/sfeature/song.html>.

of Algeria”: in the face of fundamentalist threats these monks refused to abandon their medical clinic, persevered, and were slaughtered.⁵² Typologically, barbarians, like violent fundamentalists today, shout for joy at the would-be fundamentals and actual barbarities of our being;⁵³ on *himsa*’s stallions they ride forth, like the Buddhist Mara, like Satan, bareback, breakneck, swords swinging.⁵⁴ Even when *himsa* appears to be absent, it’s always hanging around, checking its watch. In the face of our propensity to atavism, to flee is *ahimsa* and to stay, non-violently, is *ahimsa*.

As did the desert monks, and as does the Dalai Lama, the popular human face of Buddhism today, so the world’s religions offer “a vision of ethics that moves beyond the limited reciprocity of the Golden Rule to an exhortation to universal compassion.”⁵⁵ In the Golden Rule the Dalai Lama sees “the seed of compassion,” but “in the ethics of compassion, one must move beyond to a plane of genuine selflessness, which I see as fostering the qualities of a good heart.” The monks of the desert don’t gener-

52. Portrayed beautifully in the film *Of Gods and Men*; see http://nunraw.blogspot.com/2010/12/cistercian-monks-tibhirine-atlas_03.html.

53. The term “fundamentalism” comes from *The Fundamentals* published by conservative Protestants in the early twentieth century; to me, they are “would-be” fundamentals, because the understanding of Scripture is so contorted. Violent fundamentalists manifest the latent barbarities that we all carry within. A good study that focuses on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is that by Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Knopf, 2010); see 171–182. A polemical, but solid, and very readable study is by Bruce Bawer, *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* (New York: Three Rivers Press/Crown Publishing, 1998).

54. “Mara,” *New World Encyclopedia*: <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mara>. For a fuller discussion see Boyd, Chapter Six, “The Deeds of Mara” 77–99. Boyd, 79 n.1, notes that T. O. Ling, *Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil: A Study of Theravada Buddhism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962) 118ff., “has furnished a detailed summary analysis of the ‘Māra Saṃyutta,’ including a table listing the place, person(s) approached by Māra, the circumstances and the title and name given Māra in each encounter.” The *New World Encyclopedia* article notes: “Though Mara makes appearances in a variety of works, he is the focus of a group of sutras in the Pali canon, all found within the *Samyutta Nikaya* (“Grouped Discourses”) of the Sutta Pitaka. . . . Two sections are specifically focused on Mara: the *Mara-Samyutta* and the *Bhikkhuni-Samyutta*; the first describing Mara’s attacks on the Buddha and his close disciples, and the latter made up of stories of Mara’s attempts to interfere with the practice of Buddhist nuns. . . . Mara is best known for his role in opposing Buddha prior to and during his enlightenment. Many Buddhist works recount this tale, and it is told in great detail in the *Buddhacarita*, written about 100 C. E. by the Buddhist writer Ashvagoshā.” For the *Mara-Samyutta* in English online, see Mara-Samyutta, <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/english/texts/samyutta/>; <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/english/texts/samyutta/sn4-8.html>; <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/english/texts/samyutta/sn4-13.html>; <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/english/texts/samyutta/sn4-19.html>; <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/english/texts/samyutta/sn4-20.html>.

55. His Holiness The Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths: How the World’s Religions Can Come Together* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2010) 114. See Chapter 7, Compassion: Where the World’s Religions Come Together, 108–28.

ally believe they can eliminate the passions, suffering, or what Buddhism calls *dukkha*; when a young, spiritually arrogant John the Little tries to do this he gets his comeuppance.⁵⁶ But the desert fathers and mothers can mitigate suffering by suffering *with* others.⁵⁷

The Bodhisattva in the Desert

THROUGH THEIR WAY of life, teaching, spiritual counsel, and example, the early Christian monks are *bodhisattvas* of the desert. In Buddhism, a *bodhisattva* is a deity or being who has attained enlightenment—awakening—worthy of nirvana, but who remains in the human world to help others. The desert father or mother, like the Buddhist *bodhisattva*, rather than ascending to the garden of perfection remains in the desert for others:

The [altruistic ideals of the bodhisattva's vow] imply renouncing all moral and religious merit; but merit is renounced by giving it (through merit transference) to other living beings and dedicating it to enlightenment. The vow also implies renouncing the bliss of nirvana in order to be able to remain in the cycle of rebirth until all living beings in the universe have been “ferried across to the safe shore” of nirvana. . . . In the daily life of the believer, the bodhisattva ideal also represents an ethical model of compassion and service. For bodhisattvas the happiness and pain of others are their own.⁵⁸

Antony, after incessantly battling demons, becomes a holy man. But he does not become a *bodhisattva* until, seeking solitude, he retreats to the furthest desert: disciples follow him there, as do those seeking healing, and even magistrates asking him to resolve their cases. Rather than

56. See CS 59:86; CS 234:94.

57. This is not the place for an exploration of suffering in Christianity or even in early Christian monasticism. For a good brief introduction on Biblical views on suffering, see Daniel J. Simundson, “Suffering,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 6:219a–25a. As he notes, “NT writings put a heavy emphasis on suffering for others as a calling for a Christian. Just as Jesus died for others, so should Christians be willing to suffer for the good of others and the spreading of the gospel.” But then he cautions: “Such an explanation could be very helpful when suffering was clearly the result of a public witness to an unpopular religion; however, it might not be so helpful in explaining common, ordinary suffering that seemed not to be directly or indirectly related to any great witness” (224b–25a).

58. Smith 121–22.

kicking them out as though they were demons, in compassion he ministers to them, his fellow-sufferers, his fellow-patients.⁵⁹ Antony here heals and blesses Baudelaire's—and modernity's—*Le canevas banal de nos pitieux destins* / 'The banal canvas of our pitiable lives' and reverses the poet's despairing and attenuated *cri de coeur: mon semblable, —mon frère* / 'my double—my brother.'⁶⁰ Antony undoubtedly founded his site where he did because of its water source, still present. But community found him because of compassion. Soon a community grows up around him, one that has lasted almost continually more than 1600 years: Deir Anba Antuniyus, a lighthouse in the desert for those practicing *ahimsa*, throwing light on the soul's desert shoals and crags.⁶¹

Agápē Lactans

COMPASSION IS LITERALLY 'suffering with' (Latin *cum + patior*). But here again compassion is neither etymologically nor existentially an abstraction. If we're awake enough to acknowledge with Gandhi that *himsa* is the very air we breathe, through our watchful and alert lives⁶² we can take comfort, and hope, that compassion is just as innate as *himsa*, part of our very being: our guts, our entrails, our heart. In Greek *to have com-*

59. A *bodhisattva* but not, though, without at least a little kicking and screaming: "So they asked him to come just so they could see him. Antony, however, turned away the petitioners and declined the invitations of those who journeyed to see him, but they persisted even more in sending him persons charged with crimes and they sent prisoners to see if he would come down on their account. Compelled by necessity, and seeing those who were bewailing their fate, he came to the outer mountain. Once again his efforts were not without benefit, for he was able to help numerous people and his coming did a great deal of good" (Athanasius, *Vita Anton* 84; CS 202:237–39).

60. Charles Baudelaire, *Fleurs du mal / Flowers of Evil*; <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/099>.

61. See Tim Vivian, "St. Antony and the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea, ca. 350–ca. 1322/1323," *Monastic Visions: The Wall Paintings at the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea*, ed. Elizabeth S. Bolman (New Haven: Yale UP: 2002); <http://stantonymonastery.com/>.

62. In Mt 24:42–44 Jesus both instructs and warns his disciples: "Keep awake [*grēgorēite*] therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." *Grēgorēō* derives from *egeirō*, which is both transitive and intransitive: "wake, rouse," "rise, get up," "raise, help to rise," then "raise up, bring into being," "raise (to life) and "be raised (from the dead), rise." See BAGD 207b–8a, 271a–72a, and 272a. *Ēgersis* means "a coming back to life, resurrection." Thus Buddhist *enlightenment*, 'awakening', 'understanding', is spiritually akin to Jesus' admonition and Christian *gnōsis*.

passion, splanchnízomai, is cognate with *to splánchnon*, “viscera, inward parts, entrails, guts; the seat of the emotions”: “When [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion [*esplanchnisthē*] for them and cured their sick” (Mt 14:14).⁶³ In Coptic, the language of most of the desert monastics, having compassion makes use of the heart: *hēt*.⁶⁴ *Hēt* in Coptic also means ‘mind’, so compassion is both visceral and intellectual.⁶⁵ Not only “Know yourself”; pay attention to your gut.⁶⁶ With the human person now wholly integrated and possessing a holy reservoir of goodness,⁶⁷ “made in God’s image” (Gn 1:27) takes on a whole new meaning: it becomes a psychosomatic water source to slake the thirst—not only of the thirsty, but especially of those dying of dehydration and sunstroke: a Zamzam well for the world.⁶⁸

In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in the Gospel of John, the Gospel writer turns this water not into wine but into Jesus: “Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink,” you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water”’ (Jn 4:10). This story, however, seems to be not so much about compassion as about John’s pervasive—and, historically, deleterious—us-vs.-them fusillades. But elsewhere Jesus himself tells a different story, one that the Dalai Lama understands: “I often think that in the Judeo-Christian exhortation of ‘Love your neighbor,’ Jesus is effectively suggesting that the true test of one’s love of God is how much one loves one’s fellow human beings.”⁶⁹ In a parable in Matthew 25, the only

63. See BAGD 938b.

64. Pronounced *heat*; W. E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939, 1979) 217b.

65. Crum 714a.

66. Crum 211b–12a: *maht*, “bowels, intestines”; *atmaht*, “without bowels of compassion”; *shanthmaht*, “compassionate person.”

67. The deep meanings in our language reflect this: *holy* occurs before 900; Middle English *holi* evolves from Old English *hālig*, a variant of *hāleg*, equivalent to *hāl*, ‘whole’ (compare ‘hale and hearty’) + *-eg* = *-y*, cognate with Dutch, German *heilig*. *Heal* also derives from German *heilig* (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/heal?s=t>). *Holiness*, *heal(ing)*, and *wholeness* are thus siblings, if not triplets (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/holy?s=t>). Likewise, Coptic (late Egyptian), the language of most of the early desert monks, often uses *oujai*, ‘whole’, ‘sound’, ‘safe’, to translate Greek *sōzō*, ‘save’.

68. In Islam the Zamzam well is the sacred place, part of the *hajj* or pilgrimage, where God, through the angel Gabriel, strikes rock for Hagar and Ismail (Ishmael) and gives them water, a blessing for trust and faith. Although the Hebrew Bible does not mention “Jacob’s well,” Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions ecumenically locate the well at Sychar, modern Tell Balata, West Bank, the one that Jesus visits in Jn 4.

69. Dalai Lama 116.

place where he discusses the last judgment, Jesus reserves salvation (“the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”) for those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick in prison.⁷⁰ He has compassion for them *and*, compassion incarnating into action, cures their sick.

In *The Life of Antony* 3.6, Antony’s practice during his novitiate summarizes in a sentence lived compassion: “He would spend part of what he earned on bread and part of it he would give to those who were begging.”⁷¹ The danger here is for the monks—and us—to define suffering too narrowly, as if it applied only to the poor and hungry and not also to the poor in spirit.⁷² Jesus in Matthew 25, and in his ministry as a whole, knows better, and the monks know better. In her article on *ahimsa*, Hope Fitz offers a modern understanding of compassion and its concerns:

If I were to give voice to compassion, I would use terms such as sympathy, empathy, charity, but the most important component of compassion, as far as I am concerned, is the reaching out to help: those human beings or animals who are: injured; in pain, physical or psychic; infirm, indigent; those who for some reason are mentally dysfunctional; and those in any kind of need.⁷³

Stories of compassion in the desert fathers and mothers are multitudinous.⁷⁴ As the story earlier of Abba Moses and the jug filled with water

70. Jesus here defines the righteous and just (*hoi dikaioi*, v. 37) as those who care for “the least of these,” v. 45. This parable is an enacted version of Mt 19:30: “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first,” where “the first” who will be last are the non-compassionate “righteous and just” and “the last” who will be first equal “the least of these.” See Crossan, chapter 3. Richard T. Hughes clearly shows how righteousness and (social) justice, which share the same Greek root (*dika-*), unite. See “Why Conservative Christians So Often Fail the Common Good.” Part 1: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-t-hughes/a-riddle-of-life-and-death_b_487476.html; Part 2: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-t-hughes/why-conservative-christians_b_500004.html.

71. Vita Anton 3.6; CS 202:63. It is striking that whether this was Antony’s practice or represents Athanasius’s idealization, such *praktikos* for the poor and destitute is in this passage as valuable as prayer: “He prayed all the time, having learned that it is necessary to pray by oneself without ceasing.” They’re conjoined.

72. Compare Lk 6:20 (“Blessed are you who are poor”) with Mt 5:3 (“Blessed are the poor in spirit”).

73. Fitz 11.

74. See, e.g., Stelios Ramfos, *Like a Pelican in the Wilderness: Reflections on the Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross, 2000) 243: “Abba Agathon takes us to the heart of ascetic love. ‘If it were possible for me to find a leper and give him my body in exchange for his, I would be happy to do so.’” See Chapter 23, “Love and the New Humanity,” 243–60. See Douglas Burton-

illustrates, the monks focus much of their concerns around sin, forgiveness, *and* forgiveness's spiritual director and corner man: not-judging. "Not-judging," like *ahimsa*, is a negative that, enacted, becomes positive. For the monks, judging is *himsa*; not-judging is not only *ahimsa* but, lived, becomes *imitatio Christi*, imitation of Christ.

The early desert ascetics interiorize the story of the woman taken in adultery (Jn 8:1–11) and then negatively practice it: that is, they, like Jesus, teach that one should never cast the first stone—and, thus, any stone: "Abba Isaiah said, 'If the thought comes to you to judge your neighbor for some sin, first think to yourself that you are more of a sinner than he is, and do not believe that your good deeds are pleasing to God; thus you will not dare to judge your neighbor.'"⁷⁵ For the monks the problem is not so much that a small stone is in our hand, or even that a log is in our eye (Mt 7:1–6 // Lk 6:37–38, 41–42); it's that a boulder of our own devising is on our back. We are so bent under its weight that we can't see it's there; yet even in our hunched-over, crippled condition, much of the time we still try to stone others. Greater than our sin and obtuseness, the monks insist, however, is God's forgiveness: "An old man said, 'Even if someone sins in some way in your presence, do not judge him but consider yourself more of a sinner than he is, for you have seen the sin but you have not seen the repentance.'"⁷⁶

Perhaps the most powerful image of forgiveness in the desert fathers and mothers is that of a mother nursing her child:

A brother asked Abba Macarius, "My father, I have committed a transgression." . . . Abba Macarius said to him, "Repent, my child; you will see him who is gentle, our Lord Jesus Christ, his face full of joy for you, like a nursing mother whose face is full of joy for her child. When he raises his hands and his face up to her, even if he is full of all kinds of uncleanness, she does not turn away from that bad smell and excrement but takes pity on him and lifts him up and presses him to her breast, her face full of joy, and everything about him is sweet to her. If,

Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), Chapter 9, "The Commandment of Love," 261–95.

75. *Systematic Apophthegmata* 9.3, my trans. See also CS 240:133.

76. *Systematic Apophthegmata* 9.19, my trans. See Tim Vivian, *Becoming Fire: Through the Year with the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, CS 225 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian, 2008) 411.

then, this created person has pity for her child, how much greater is the love of the creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, for us!⁷⁷

Long before Julian of Norwich in the thirteenth century saw Christ as mother,⁷⁸ for the monks of the desert Christ in his divinity could be a nursing mother because Christ in his humanity suckles the breast of his mother, the *Theotókos*, the Mother of God; and *Maria Galaktotrophousa*, *Maria Lactans*, Mary breast-feeding, through Christ breast feeds the world.⁷⁹ Baby Jesus feeding at his mother's breast is Jesus at his most human—and most vulnerable; by nourishing him, his mother represents and embodies the limitless love possible by one human being for another. *Agápē lactans*.

For Jesus, as the Dalai Lama has reminded us, “the true test of one's love of God is how much one loves one's fellow human beings.”⁸⁰ But the modern spiritual leader doesn't stop there. Fitz observes that in the Indian Vedic writings the “ancient idea of non-harm by thought, word, or deed” “pertains to humans,” but that the Buddhists developed it to apply also to non-human animals: “Animals can react to both word and the tone used to impart those words. Thus, they can be harmed by words. Also, the thought of harm affects the character of the person harboring the thought.”⁸¹ To support Buddhism's universalizing of *ahimsa* the Dalai Lama quotes the “*sutra* on loving-kindness”:

As a mother would risk her life
to protect her child, her only child,
Even so should one cultivate a limitless heart
with regard to all beings.
With good will for the entire cosmos,
cultivate a limitless heart:

77. *Virtues of Saint Macarius* 23; *St. Macarius the Spiritbearer: Coptic Texts Relating to Saint Macarius the Great*, trans. Tim Vivian (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2004) 104.

78. See Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* 58. There are numerous translations; online: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/julian/revelations.toc.html>.

79. See Elizabeth S. Bolman, “The Enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa and the Cult of the Virgin Mary in Egypt” 2–23, *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos*, ed. Maria Vassilaki, *Byzantium* (London: Ashgate, 2005). For images: https://www.google.com/search?q=galaktotrophousa&hl=en&safe=off&prmd=imvns&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=YT8EUOztN-a42gXth9CaAw&sqi=2&ved=0CEMQ_AUoAQ&biw=1247&bih=664.

80. Dalai Lama 116.

81. Fitz 10–11. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1987) 26–27.

Above, below, and all around,
 Unobstructed, without enmity or hate.
 Whether standing, walking,
 Sitting, or lying down,
 As long as one is alert,
 One should be resolved on this mindfulness.⁸²

Some eight to nine centuries after Buddha, the desert fathers and mothers not only preached such radical—that is, rooted—universal love; they enacted it with “the least of these,” non-human animals. Such enactment makes them kin with Buddha, born of the same womb of compassion.

The *Virtues of Saint Macarius* joins other early monastic literature in having the natural order, including animals, obey the commandments of the monks. But such obeisance, long practiced—and often abused—by humankind, represents only the first, introductory, level of relationship between the early monks and animals. Two deeper levels exist: animals as parables, and monks and animals together as enacted parables. For Macarius, the animal world provides a vivid means with which to address spiritual concerns; his actions, then, become speech, teaching, and parable. One time, Macarius tells the monks, an antelope took hold of his tunic and pulled. Macarius followed it to where it lived and found its three young lying on the ground:

When I sat down, [Macarius continues,] the antelope took hold of its young one by one and placed them in my lap and when I touched them I found that they were deformed: their chins were on their backs. I took pity on them as their mother wept; I groaned over them, saying, “You who care for all of creation, our Lord Jesus Christ, who have numerous treasuries of mercy, take pity on the creature you made.” After I said these words accompanied by tears before my Lord Jesus Christ, I stretched out my hand and made the saving sign of the cross over the antelope’s young, and they were healed. When I put them down, their mother immediately gave them her attention. They went underneath to her nipples and sucked her milk. She rejoiced over them, delighting in

82. Metta Sutta, from *The Sutta Nipata* 1.8; Dalai Lama 116. In *Toward a True Kinship* the Dalai Lama speaks often of compassion and being a mother: “I often think of my mother as my first teacher of compassion” (114); “Because we have all been nurtured in a womb, because we are all born of a mother, affection is in our basic nature” (121). On *womb* and *compassion* in Hebrew, see Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) 47–48.

them, looking into my eyes with great joy. I marveled at the goodness of God and the love for humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ as shown by his tender mercies for me and for the other beasts that he cares about.

In this profoundly Christocentric story, I see Macarius seating Christ and Buddha, and Gandhi and the Dalai Lama, at the same Eucharistic table: the table of empathy and compassion.

A step further than using animals as illustrations and examples is to tell someone actually to become like an animal. In the following parable Macarius uses sheep and their eating habits to teach about ruminating on the Blessed Name. A brother asks him, “What work is best for the ascetic and the abstinent?” Macarius responds:

Blessed is the person who will be found tending the blessed name of our Lord Jesus Christ without ceasing and with contrition of heart. Of all the ascetic practices, none is better than this blessed nourishment if you ruminate on it at all times like the sheep: the sheep regurgitates and savors the sweet taste of its cud until it enters the interior of its heart and brings sweetness and good fatness to its intestines and to all its inwards. Do you not see how beautiful its cheeks are, filled with the sweet cud that it ruminates in its mouth? May our Lord Jesus Christ bless us too with his sweet and fat name!⁸³

When the brother asks the meaning of this parable, to explain himself Macarius cites a passage from Isaiah (38:14 [LXX]) that employs animals: “There is no better meditation than having this saving and blessed name of our Lord Jesus Christ continually within you, as it is written: ‘Like a swallow I will call and like a dove I will meditate.’ Thus it is with the person who worships God by tending the saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸⁴

As with Jesus in his parables, Macarius uses the homely, the familiar, the everyday, to make striking spiritual observations and suggestions. This desert abba, moreover, uses parables not just to strike a vivid image like a flint in the darkness, but to build a bonfire illuminating the mercy and compassion of Christ; in his words of wisdom he refers over and over again to Christ’s “numerous treasuries of compassion,” a compassion that

83. *Virtues of Saint Macarius* 34; Vivian, *St Macarius* 111–12.

84. *Virtues of Saint Macarius* 35; Vivian, *St Macarius* 112. See Is 38:14.

comes from the creation, incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.⁸⁵ In the *Virtues of Macarius* some enacted parables vividly demonstrate this compassion. In these parables Macarius doesn't just use animals as metaphors to recommend a virtue or course of action; instead, recounting his own experience, in these stories Macarius *enacts* the virtue or has it enacted before his eyes.

One time when Macarius is working the harvest with the brothers, a wolf cries out, "its eyes staring up to heaven to the Lord." The saint stops and smiles with tears in his eyes. When the brothers see this, they're amazed, throw themselves down at his feet, and ask what's going on. Macarius answers: This wolf

cried up to the lover of humanity, to the compassionate one alone, who possesses the treasures of numerous mercies, our Lord Jesus Christ, saying, "If you are not going to care about me and provide me with my food, at least tell me why I am suffering. You were the one who created me." If even flesh-eating beasts have understanding and cry up to the goodness of our Lord Jesus Christ and he nourishes all of them, then how will he not care about us, who are rational beings, with his bountiful mercy and compassion?⁸⁶

This saying contains a number of revelations:

- first, suffering does exist, among the wild animals as among us;
- suffering serves as a salutary reminder here, as numerous Native American religions well know, that the "flesh-eating beasts" are our brothers and sisters;
- implicit, too, in this saying is the fact that if animals suffer, then they are like Christ, the suffering servant;
- as any pastor, whether lay or ordained, knows, this wolf's heart-cry is our own: "Tell me why I am suffering."

Macarius, as a holy man attuned to God, hears the language the wolf is speaking, the universal language of suffering. After "the luminary and light-giver" helps the wolf, the story concludes, "the wolf stood with its mouth agape. Afterwards, the beast went to the place where God had prepared food for it. . . ."

85. Buddhism teaches "the treasures of the Dharma"; see *The Path of Compassion: The Bodhisattva Precepts*, trans. Martine Batchelor (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira /Rowman, 2004) 90.

86. *Virtues of Saint Macarius* 36; Vivian, *St Macarius* 112–13.

As we've seen with Macarius, for many of the desert fathers and mothers, God has compassion for the whole creation. Emulating Christ in the desert (*imitatio Christi*), the monks can also hear, though far away, the pellucid sounds of Buddha turning the wheel of the *dharmā*, the truth about the way things are and will always be. With his first sermon, Buddha “turned the Wheel of Dharma,” that is, “he set in motion the Buddhist tradition and created the Buddhist community” to alleviate suffering.⁸⁷ As a cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1–2), the Buddha, Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Jesus, and the desert fathers and mothers affirm, not only with their lips but in their lives, that there *is* escape from suffering.⁸⁸ For the desert monastics, responsibility, as the poet reminds us, begins in dreams—that is, in the hope, in the understanding, in the enacted desire that suffering is neither total nor triumphant.⁸⁹ Reality thus transformed, and transforming, exists only by putting such dreams, “the Sabbath year [of forgiveness and reconciliation] within God’s dream of God’s world for all God’s people,” into practice.⁹⁰ Perhaps *ahimsa* represents, even defines, what is, let us hope, what is inherent, not only in each religion but also in each human person, and in humanity as a whole. If not inherent, then, the best. In either case, what is inherent or best—as Jesus and Buddha teach and model—is nurturable and teachable, and thus capable of being practiced, and lived.

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87. Smith 366a; see “The First Sermon of the Buddha” (<http://www.as.miami.edu/phi/bio/Buddha/firstsermon.html>).

88. In his first sermon Buddha offers the Noble Eightfold Path, all of which the early desert monks practice in a Christian manner: 1. The Way to the End of Suffering; 2. Right View; 3. Right Intentions; 4. Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood; 5. Right Effort; 6. Right Mindfulness; 7. Right Concentration; 8. The Development of Wisdom.

89. Delmore Schwartz, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities” (<http://myteacherpages.com/web-pages/klopez/files/In%20Dreams%20Begin%20Responsibilities.pdf>). As Crossan puts it in his discussion of the Sabbath year: dream: “God’s dream of God’s world for all God’s people”; responsibility: “the Sabbath year had three aspects—resting fields, remitting debts, and freeing debt slaves” (150).

90. Crossan 150.