

## The "Satya" in Satyagraha

### Samdhong Rinpoche's Approach to Nonviolence

THE MOST VEN. PROF. SAMDHONG RINPOCHE has been for the past decade the world's foremost theoretical exponent and practical advocate of a specifically Gandhian approach to nonviolence, both as a doctrine of political action and as a personal religious practice. From one perspective this is unsurprising: Ahimsa is central to Buddhism; the Tibetan exile has its center in India; His Holiness the Dalai Lama pays homage to the Mahatma's legacy. From another perspective, however, there is a surprise here: *Satyagraha* as it is theorized by Gandhi and as it is theorized by Samdhong Rinpoche is a specifically religious doctrine. But the religious contexts in which they each theorize are dramatically different, and in particular differ regarding the nature of *satya* itself and regarding the nature of the practitioner and the soteriology implicated by the practice of *satyagraha*. It would therefore be both facile and misleading to assume that *satyagraha* for Samdhong Rinpoche is the same *satyagraha* as it is for Gandhi.

In particular, to construct Samdhong Rinpoche's *satyagraha*, I must provide an account of *satya* appropriate to an atheistic Buddhist context, and an account of *agraha* and of *graha* that makes sense in the context of Buddhist practice and soteriology. It should be plain that this is necessary. For Gandhi's *satya* is grounded in the permanence of *ātman* and its centrality for action, in the union of the personal *ātman* with the godhead, and in the revealed truth of the Hindu scriptures. These truths are not available to a Buddhist *satyagrahi*. But this does not mean that Gandhi's central insight that grasping the nature of reality and insistence on truth is the foundation of all morally significant action and meaningful life. All that it means is that we need to understand what that truth could be for a Buddhist practitioner and what it is to grasp and to insist on it. When we do so, we will see that the core Gandhian commitment to nonviolence in body, speech, and mind as an organizing principle for personal and political life remains intact, but that this commitment is provided with a new foundation.

## TRUTH, EXISTENCE, AND REALITY

*Satya* is most often translated into English, particularly in the context of *satyagraha* theory, as "truth." While this translation is perfectly good, it can mislead if we do not pay attention to the full semantic range of the term, which could as well be translated "reality" or "what is the case." This emphasis is important because one might otherwise think that *satyagraha* is especially connected with some doctrine or set of theses—true sentences. It is not. While sometimes theses are the things on which the *satyagrahi* insists, or grasps, sometimes it is simply realities that are grasped or on the recognition of which the *satyagrahi* insists.

The compound *satyāgraha* also poses interesting translational problems in its own right, even once we understand the meaning(s) of *satya*. For it could arise from conjoining *satya* with *graha*, and so mean "grasping the truth." Or it could result from conjoining *satya* with *āgraha* and so mean "insistence on the truth." Either reading can be appropriate, depending on context. So, *satyagraha* does involve a grasping, and an insistence on the truth of, and action reflecting the grasping and insistence upon, certain correct doctrines. Obviously, given the fact that this first meaning of *satya* is in play in *satyagraha* theory, we are going to have to understand Samdhong Rinpoche's *satyagraha* as involving the grasping and insistence upon certain Buddhist truths or on reality as it is seen from a Buddhist perspective. We will return to this issue later in this chapter. But while *satyagraha* is indeed always connected to certain doctrines or theses, to understand it in such purely declarative terms would be at best partial.

In the second sense of *satya*, *satyagraha* is action that reflects and is grounded in the nature of reality. In this sense *satyagraha* need not itself derive from any specific theory or doctrine but might reflect a spontaneous and direct awareness of how things stand and indeed might itself not so much derive from but represent truth, by demonstrating the nature of reality and appropriate engagement with that reality.

The third sense of *satya*, "what is the case," might appear to be indistinguishable from the second. The difference, however, is crucial if we are to understand the multilayered character of *satyagraha* and if we are to set it in a properly Buddhist context. Whereas in the second sense *satya* denotes the nature of reality, in the third it denotes what is the case in a particular circumstance, how things in fact contingently stand. Effective action requires not just (or perhaps not at all) a grasp of theory, not just a harmony of action with the fundamental nature of reality, but also awareness of the concrete details of the immediate context of action. A firm grasp of the details of the action-context and insistence on the particular facts against obfuscation or error is constitutive of *satyagraha*.

All of these senses of *satya* and correlatively of *satyagraha* are present in Gandhi's theory and practice, as well as in that of Samdhong Rinpoche. I will not be exploring the way they articulate in Gandhi's own account but rather explaining

how to understand Samdhong Rinpoche's version of *satyagraha*, given his understanding of truth, reality, and action in accordance with reality and circumstances, grounded as it is in Buddhist action theory. I will also be concerned with *satyagraha* as a practice for ordinary human beings. Buddhas and highly realized bodhisattvas are necessarily *satyagrahis*. But I am not writing for them. They need neither a philosophical discussion of truth nor a discussion of the nature of a life lived in accordance with truth. *Satyagraha* must, if it is to be relevant to human political and personal life, be possible for ordinary beings like us, and it is to ordinary beings that the mahatma and Samdhong Rinpoche address themselves. Indeed, it may be Gandhi's deepest insight, and one with which Samdhong Rinpoche would undoubtedly agree, that *satyagraha* represents the only way that an ordinary human being can lead a fully human life. For this reason the analysis of truth, of action, of thought, and of speech I provide will be resolutely an analysis of these phenomena as they are experienced, enacted, and lived by ordinary human beings.

#### THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS AND THE FUNDAMENTAL NATURE OF REALITY

Let us first pay attention to reality. The reality in question is *human* reality, the world in which we find ourselves and in which we act. It is important to hold this fact in mind because otherwise we might confuse the reality with which we are concerned in action theory and in ordinary individual and political practice with the impersonal reality of the physicists. We might then be very puzzled about how even to understand the Four Noble Truths or the doctrine of the Two Truths so central to any Mahāyāna account of life and action. Or we might on the other hand confuse that reality with which we are concerned with that experienced by a buddha, and so be perplexed regarding the degree to which reality is characterized in a Buddhist framework as so problematic.

The reality of the physicist is impersonal in precisely the following sense: it is furnished indifferently with physical objects: some observable and some not; some sentient, some not; some alive, some not. And all are equally real whether they matter or not; whether they come to any consciousness or not. All equally *exist*. But none are *present*. None *matter*. None are *persons*. Such a universe is a universe of *things*, but not of *beings*. We, however, inhabit no such universe. We instead inhabit a *world*. And a world is populated by beings, which beings are *present* to us. These beings are heterogenous. Some are, like us, other persons. Others, while not persons, are nonetheless sentient. These *matter*. Others are *merely* matter and are of less account. But they are not for that reason of *no* account. For there are valuables and values that transcend persons and their concerns.

But persons and their concerns are nonetheless crucial to bringing a world and its beings into presence and hence into the reality that matters from the

standpoint of action and morality. For things become present to us by virtue of our concerns and projects, and they become present to us as the things that they are, enmeshed in the networks of interdependence in which they figure, by virtue of our projects, concerns, and the way of seeing the world they induce. These projects and concerns are conditioned, to be sure, by the projects and concerns of the other persons with whom we (not necessarily willingly) share, and in (not necessarily voluntary or conscious) collaboration with whom we construct our world.

Other persons present themselves to us *as* persons because we *care* about persons; sentient beings are present to us *as* sentient beings because sentience matters; tools emerge from the physical totality as tools, and as tools of specific kinds—computers, swords, or ploughshares—precisely because of our purposes and their suitability to and design for those purposes. To live in a world is hence to live in an organized and interdependent structure of objects whose existence in that world and whose place in that ordered totality is determined by our patterns of concern and care, by our projects and intentions. We are, of course, inextricably embedded in and constituted by that world. It and its beings reciprocally determined our patterns of care and concern, our projects, possibilities of action and plans, and hence our very being. To be a person is hence both to determine and to be determined by a world.

Though I have expressed this point in the language of Western existential phenomenology, my point is perfectly Buddhist, just another way of insisting on the special role of mind in determining the ontology of the world, a role always limited by the corporeal. It is another way of explaining how all objects of consciousness are conventional and lack existence from their own side. It is another way of explaining *pratītya-samutpāda*. It is another way of expressing the principle that the world we live in is determined by our karma—our actions, including those of body, speech, and mind. Finally, it is another way of expressing the first two of the Four Noble Truths and of grounding the second two and so provides a way of addressing the question regarding both the nature of the *satya* and the nature of the *agraha* in *satyāgraha*.

To say that our care and our concerns structure the world in which we find ourselves is not to adopt a mystic idealism—far from it. It is rather to say that what emerges out of the background as an object of potential engagement is determined by what we care about, what we are ready to perceive, by our human purposes, and by what we are prepared to recognize. That is why it is fair to say with the Madhyamaka tradition that the phenomena we encounter—those comprised by our world—are conventional, and that their existence is only an existence relative to our distinctive consciousness. That is why the world we inhabit is a function of our activity.

The Four Noble Truths are truths about our world, not about the abstract reality of the physicist. The truth of dependent arising, and the Two Truths,

likewise, are pre-eminently truths about the world we humans inhabit. Let us explore just how to understand these truths in the context of praxis and hence in the domain of *satyagraha*. All *this* is suffering. All of *what*? All that emerges from our care and concern. How so? First, and most obviously, to care about something is to be vulnerable to the inevitable fact that that about which one cares is inevitably impermanent, imperiled, and less than one might have hoped it would be. This is true whether the object of care is a loved one, a possession, the welfare of distant others, or even a cherished ideology, political program, or theory. It is a deep fact about the human predicament, and one of the Buddha's greatest insights, that for anything to be an object for us is for it to come into presence and hence into being for us through suffering, and to be an endless cause of suffering. The only alternative is the depersonalization of reality and ceasing to inhabit a human world. But that is no help. From a Mahāyāna viewpoint, and that is the moral perspective of Samdhong Rinpoche, to cease to inhabit a human world—even were that possible—would be a far greater suffering for beings like us. (And again, the care with which we are concerned is ordinary human care, nothing supramundane—a care sufficient to generate a world, sufficient to recognize and to ground suffering, and sufficient to motivate its alleviation.)

Second, though, and from the standpoint of social action, of equal importance: this is all suffering because it comprises countless sentient beings, and countless sentient beings are suffering in countless ways. If the world were simply a collection, simply a heap of unrelated things, it would hardly follow from this fact that *all* this is suffering. But given that our world is constituted as an interconnected whole and not as a collection of atomic points, the fact of suffering anywhere inevitably means that the whole must be thought of as suffering. It is an inevitable fact that we will be aware of the suffering of others. Our choices are two: to be moved by that suffering to suffer alongside, or to remain indifferent. In the first case, of course, we suffer. In the second case, however, we suffer even more, by virtue of our diminished humanity and our alienation from that world that alone can give our lives meaning. Any suffering is hence omnipresent. (And this, we might add, is as true for the Bodhisattva as it is for the ordinary person.)

Suffering has a cause, and that, globally and transcendentally, is attachment. We have seen why this is so. The very fact that we are enmeshed in a world structured by our concerns, attached to others through bonds of community and care, and connected to other points in space and time by projects, plans, and memories guarantees that we are vulnerable to pain, to death, to impermanence in all its guises and to the unpredictable and uncontrollable slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. And even were it, *per impossibile*, an option, as we have seen, detachment would be useless. Furthermore, each mundane instance of suffering has a cause. Wars do not just happen. They are waged. Starvation comes about not through random meteorological events, but through a failure to distribute

food adequately. Poverty is a consequence not of privation but of economic injustice. And so on and on. The particular causes of suffering are as innumerable as are its instances, and the root is as universal as the phenomenon is universal.

So there is a release from suffering. We must understand this release in at least two ways: first, the suffering we encounter in the world can be alleviated, and indeed it can be alleviated through our efforts. We can comfort and sometimes cure the sick. We can calm the dying. We can prevent war and violence. We can promote economic justice and reconciliation. We cannot be guaranteed success in any of these ventures, but neither is failure a certainty. And progress requires only effort. Second, a release from suffering is possible through one's own practice, through the alleviation of what the Buddhist tradition calls "primal ignorance." That is ignorance about the fundamental nature of reality. Understood within this framework, such ignorance is embodied in the delusion that we are atomic, that our fate is independent of that of others, and that our world is not of our making. So long as we see ourselves, our fate, and our world in this way, it is inconceivable that anything could give our lives meaning, simply because we thereby cut ourselves off from everything meaningful, and everything in which our lives could be reflected. To extirpate this ignorance is not to transcend the web of interconnection and care that constitutes suffering, but to live in it with sufficient understanding, hope, and purpose that that suffering itself gains meaning and that our lives gain purpose. This mundane release from suffering is thus not an escape from the world in which suffering is omnipresent, but an engagement in that world in a way that transforms suffering into purposive action.

The eightfold Buddhist path then offers a solid commonsense approach to achieving that purpose, to living a life of careful interdependent action aimed at the alleviation of suffering, a life in which physical action, the livelihood that organizes one's productive life, thought, and speech are directed to issues that merit concern. The Fourth Noble Truth is the simple fact that only a life lived in authentic awareness of and response to our existential situation is a life worth living. To fall from this standard is necessarily to fail to grasp the nature of existence, to fail to face up to reality, and ultimately to fail to insist on the truth as the guiding principle of one's life. In short, it is to lead a life guided by delusion and devoid of real significance, "a tale told by a fool, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

The Four Noble Truths are, of course, grounded in interdependence, and this grounding, I hope, has emerged in this existential analysis, as it emerges in that of the Buddha and in that of Nāgārjuna. But they are also, as Nāgārjuna properly emphasizes, grounded in the Two Truths—the conventional truth of the reality and interdependence of phenomena and the ultimate truth of their emptiness of inherent existence. If there is an advantage to the existential understanding of the Four Noble Truths as truths about the lived world of human existence, it is that it is so plain on this account just how the Two Truths ground the Four: the

emptiness of all phenomena is simply the fact that the beings of our world have no being independent of our care, our projects, our consciousness, and our lives; the emptiness of the person is the fact that to be a human being is to project oneself into a world with such cares, projects, and consciousness of others, and that absent these, we and the world are literally nothing.

The conventional truth of things is the fact that despite being nothing in abstraction from this context of concern, the being we bring to things through such engagement is indeed being in the fullest possible sense, not some counterfeit or second-class being. Moreover, such a conventionally constituted world is—not despite, but because of its conventional character—worthy of our effort and care. There simply is no more real, more important place in which to expend our efforts or to live our lives. And the unity of the Two Truths that is the foundation of the Madhyamaka and the wellspring of compassion is the fact that being can *only* be being-in-the-world, and that being-in-the-world can only be conventional in precisely this sense and therefore can only be empty, precisely in this sense.

This is the truth, the reality, and the existence on which it makes sense, from a Buddhist perspective, to insist, which it makes sense to face, and which must be grasped in order for effective action and meaningful life to be possible. We now consider what it is to actualize this truth and our insistence on it in the practice of *satyagraha* so understood.

#### GRASPING REALITY AND INSISTING ON THE TRUTH

What is it to face up to what is, to grasp reality and to insist on the truth? First of all, to face up to what is, is to acknowledge frankly the omnipresence of suffering, the fact that the causes of suffering are concrete, adventitious, and often actions for which human beings typically bear causal and moral responsibility. This is no mean feat. It is easy to avert one's gaze, to lose oneself in contemplation and enjoyment of the good things in life, and to treat suffering either as unreal, distant, or as an unavoidable part of the background against which we live. It might appear that by living in denial of suffering we live more happily. But a central insight of *satyagraha* is that the reverse is in fact true. For alienation from all that is significant cannot be a source of genuine happiness, and to deny suffering is to alienate oneself from the world and all that it comprises. That is to lead a life both lonely and meaningless, and to anticipate a death at which one will have no option but to look back over a wasted and pointless existence, that of the "poor player who frets and struts his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. . . ."

To face authentically what is, is to take seriously the fact one can be an agent for the alleviation of suffering and that to fail to act is to be complicit in the causation of suffering. Again, it is easy not to face up to this fact, but not to do

so is to turn one's back and so to live in bad faith. And finally, to face up to what is, is to take seriously the fact that specific courses of action, specific ways of thinking, and the participation in particular discourses are necessary tools in the alleviation of suffering and become morally mandatory for anyone who takes life seriously. That is, *satyagraha* determines a course of action, and that course of action is roughly specified in the eightfold path.

All of this is at the level of concrete, conventional truth, and all of this reflects the simple consequences of taking the empirical facts of the human condition seriously together with taking one's own humanity seriously. But what is it to grasp reality at a somewhat deeper level—the second dimension of Buddhist *satyagraha*? To grasp reality in this sense is to grasp the truth of interdependence, or one's own situatedness in a world in which bonds of causation and care connect one to all others situated in that world. It is to grasp the fact that all suffering is inevitably one's own, and so to cultivate not merely sympathy but compassion, the great compassion that inevitably leads to engagement and action. It is to grasp the fact that in participating in the constitution of the world we inhabit we are therefore responsible for that world. To grasp reality in this sense is hence to grasp the fact that the bodhisattva path is not simply the *supreme* human moral path, but the *only* truly human life. And to grasp that reality is therefore to embark upon that path.

To *insist* on the truth is to proceed one step farther. In the language of the evangelical Christian tradition, it is to "testify." For this reason *satyagraha* is necessarily a public life. *Satyagraha* in this sense is pedagogical, publicly calling attention to the truth and demanding attention. This insistence may be verbal. But effective *satyagraha* is always more than that. The actions of the *satyagrahi* are themselves, as Alomes (1998) has eloquently argued, representational, and this representational character is as important as their more direct effects, as they force broad attention to the situations toward which they are directed and to *satyagraha* itself. They simultaneously engage with reality and publicly demonstrate uncomfortable facts and the duties those facts impose. When the Mahatma led the salt march, the public character of that act demonstrated the immorality of the Salt Act, of British repression in India, of the possibility of nonviolent resistance, of the right to make salt, and of the right to *svaraj* and, most important, of the duty injustice imposes to resist openly and nonviolently. To make salt in secret would indeed have been to make salt but would have been literally an insignificant act, failing utterly to engage the moral issues simply because without the public dimension there can be no representational content to the act. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., urged a public boycott of the Montgomery, Alabama, buses. It was important not simply that African-Americans not ride segregated buses, but that they be *seen* not to do so, and that their being seen not to do so was articulate, ostending an injustice, a just alternative, and a non-violent method for obtaining justice.

This representational character of *satyagraha* imposes the greatest duties on the *satyagrahi*. His or her every action is not only an engagement, but a demonstration and an assertion. Hence to misstep is also to mislead and to deceive. An act either of violence or of cowardice, however unintentional, could be read by the audience of the action as indicating the justice of such an action. Insistence, hence, requires supreme effort and supreme mindfulness. For the same reason that mindfulness is at the foundation of the eightfold path and of all Buddhist practice, it lies at the heart of *satyagraha*.

I have been characterizing a Buddhist *satyagraha* by grounding practice on a Buddhist conception of truth in an effort to understand the most Ven. Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche's appropriation of Gandhi's ideas and approaches in a Buddhist context. It is perhaps not at all surprising that the account of the practice of *satyagraha* that emerges is no different from what Gandhi himself would have articulated, despite the vast difference in the account of truth and in the relation of practice to that truth. For each account is grounded in a common insight: political action is not incompatible with spiritual practice. It can, in fact, be the highest form of spiritual practice. For to live an authentic life is to live in recognition of interdependence and to honor one's commitment to the world of which one is a part, living so that one's own being is a public reflection of reality. Retreating from the public sphere when public action is necessary is a betrayal. Any truth worthy of articulation is too important to betray.