

Letting Go to Letting Love: Christian and Hindu Religious Paths of Non-attachment as Ways of Practicing Peace and Justice

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Abstract

Religious paths of non-attachment are notoriously challenging and promisingly rewarding. In the context of the pursuit of peace and justice, these paths can be particularly challenging and contradictory while influencing profound societal change. The ancient arts of “letting go” through the non-attachment of Christian *agape* and Hindu *anasakti* have been taken up, wielded, and innovated by many giants of nonviolent liberation movements of recent decades. This paper explores non-attachment, particularly in the forms of *agape* and *anasakti yoga*, as ways of being an activist in pursuit of peace and justice. It argues that by letting go of power, control, and desire for particular outcomes, one has a greater chance of fostering sustainable, mutually healing peace and justice. This paper goes on to encourage further examination of diverse experiences of non-attachment and peace and justice efforts, critical voices, and limitations.

Introduction

The seeds of conflict and injustice are often sown when one group seeks power and control over another. Indeed, causes of injustice such as seizing scarce resources, settler colonization, and segregationist rules all have in common self-service and the grasp for control. On the face of such scenarios, to advocates for the oppressed group, it is more than plain that a “letting go” of control would be the antidote to injustice.

It is one thing to ask this of perpetrators of injustice: *Please let go of your gun, lift your boot, give up your unrightful power*; they are unlikely to respond well, if at all. It is another thing entirely for the peacemakers and justice-seekers to themselves take up this task of “letting go.” It seems counterintuitive for someone in such a posture of intense care and a position of inequality to dismiss the intensity of their care or to relinquish their remaining control. We activists often use the language of commitment, unwillingness to compromise or “look away,” “building power,” holding fast to principles like equality—what feels like the direct opposite of “letting go.”

Yet the act of “letting go,” particularly of one’s control, particularly as a spiritual practice, can be instrumental in peacebuilding and resistance for justice. Peacebuilders who take up the practice of Hindu non-attachment or similarly, the Christian practice of agape love, may find new success and sustainability in their peacebuilding and justice-seeking. Liberation involves the undoing of chains. What if some of these chains are to our own power and expectations?

Letting Go as Peace and Justice Practice

Pioneering conflict transformation practitioner and professor John Paul Lederach calls peacebuilders to “vulnerability and [letting] go of the need for a priori control [of] the process or outcome.”¹ As students of his art, several questions may naturally arise in us, chief among them is: *How?* How does a peacebuilder—with tools and experience they’ve acquired to facilitate transformation—let go? How does an advocate for justice—with all their planned direct actions, committed to the struggle as a voice for the voiceless—let go? How can we let go when reconciliation requires us moving closer? How does an oppressed person let go of the fraction of control that remains available to them? How can we be sure that “letting go” will yield positive results—equality, justice, reconciliation, peace? This paper will endeavor to respond to these questions through the examination and exploration of two disciplines popular among successful, faith-motivated peacemakers and practitioners of restorative justice: Hindu *anasakti yoga* and Christian *agape* love.

Before doing so however, let us define these two disciplines within their own religions, recognizing their relationship to one another and to the central idea of this paper of “letting go.”:

Defining Anasakti and Agape

Anasakti (अनासक्ति) is a Sanskrit word for the Hindu ideal of non-attachment, particularly non-attachment to the results of one’s actions. Psychologists Sudha Banth and Charu Talwar note “the ‘Eastern’ meaning of the term is far deeper than the conventional English literal interpretation” which might be difficult to go beyond in this paper. Indigenous to the East, *anasakti* is also related to Buddhist and Jain concepts of non-attachment. Acknowledging the wide diversity of paths in Hinduism, another layer of practice to consider alongside *anasakti yoga* is *vairagya*, which encourages a broader dispassion. In the Bhagavad Gita, the path of *anasakti yoga*, the dispassionate attitude, is brought to the fore in the

¹ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

teachings of Lord Krishna as the key to liberation which is “the ultimate goal of humanity.”² Chapter 5 verse 10 of the Bhagavad Gita carries a glimpse of this idea: “One who performs his duty without attachment, surrendering the results unto the Supreme Lord, is unaffected by sinful action, as the lotus is untouched by muddy water.”

In his book, *The Way to Love*, Indian Jesuit Priest Anthony de Mello wrote “Love can only arise when attachment has gone. Only then will you know what love is.”³ In this book, de Mello profoundly draws out non-attachment as the expression of deep, unconditional love.

Such love is found in agape. Different than being a philosophy like anasakti, agape is fundamentally based and embodied in a person. Jesus Christ, who intervenes and loves sacrificially, is love and creates a new definition for love.⁴ According to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., agape (ἀγάπη) is “an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative... Agape is *disinterested love* [emphasis added]. It is a love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbor (I Cor. 10:24).”⁵ It is not to be confused with friendly, reciprocal love, nor romantic, affectionate love—neither of which would be fitting for conflict-afflicted or unjust scenarios. This “disinterested love” in Christianity lets go of any demand for personal gain or response from the beloved. It is often “expressed in spite of unloving others.”⁶

Agape finds accessible parallels in Islam and Judaism, too, for example with the Muslim view of Allah as “Al-Rahman” (the Merciful) and the Jewish tenet of “hesed” (loving-kindness or mercy). Orthodox Christianity traditionally sees agape love as core to God’s character, and its ultimate expression in Jesus’ self-giving death on the Cross. The Apostle Paul frames this ultimate expression as Jesus “emptying himself,” *kenoo* in Greek, embracing complete vulnerability and powerlessness in order to reconcile a beloved humanity to God.⁷ *Agape* is the Greek word the Apostle John used to describe God’s love for the world in his sacrifice⁸, and it is also the root word in Jesus’ famous and controversial call to “love your enemies.”⁹ Other examples of agape are found in the saints and the church fathers and

² Sudha Banth and Charu Talwar, “Anasakti, the Hindu Ideal, and Its Relationship to Well-Being and Orientations to Happiness,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 51, no. 3 (October 15, 2010): 934–46, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-010-9402-3>.

³ Anthony De Mello, *The Way to Love: The Last Meditations of Anthony De Mello* (Image Books, 1995).

⁴ Mackie, “Love”

⁵ Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

⁶ Thomas Jay Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2010).

⁷ Phil. 2:7

⁸ John 3:16

⁹ Matthew 5:44

mothers, including St. Olympia who generously gave of herself to those in need and was known for showing compassion to both friend and enemy.

When one chooses to put on agape, aspects of anasakti find their mirror: detachment from possessions, position, and control make way for peaceful relationships and full life. These religious expressions of the spiritual and material phenomenon of “letting go”—anasakti and agape—carry much of the weight of faithful, fulfilled living in both Hinduism and Christianity, respectively. In the conceptions of these two religions, detachment is not indifference—rather, it is acting with unconditional love, without craving or fear.

Anasakti and Agape as a Vehicle for Peacebuilding and Restoring Justice

Starting again within the sacred texts of these two religions, we can find a range of calls to peacemaking and restorative justice motivated by the practice of “letting go.”:

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna describes to his disciple that “he who does holy work, Arjuna, because it ought to be done and surrenders selfishness and thought of reward, his work is pure, and is peace...” highlighting the need to surrender desired outcomes in order to effect peace in oneself and one’s world.¹⁰

In the Bible, in response to a rich young ruler’s quest, Jesus says “If you want to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”¹¹ At another time, Jesus is asked “which is the great commandment?” to which he replies with the Shema, that “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart... [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself” using, of course, a conjugation of agape in the written Greek.¹² Jesus decidedly relates the ancient command for agape to detachment from possessions as a vehicle for economic justice.

The path of letting go to letting love flow is both deeply spiritual and intentionally present to injustice and disharmony. In the chapter “A force more powerful”, peacebuilding scholar David Cortright reflects on non-attachment and agape, beautifully weaving them together:

“In the Eastern tradition spiritual fulfillment comes through complete selflessness and detachment from the fruits of labor. Love and sacrifice are offered entirely for their own sake,

¹⁰ Bhagavad Gita, 18:9

¹¹ Matthew 19:21

¹² Matthew 22:36-40

without thought of reward. Agape is equally demanding... Agape is the means through which we seek to mold the human community in God's image. It enables us to love the person who commits evil even as we resist the evil being committed."¹³

Taking up such a practice thus has profound implications for living in the world and meeting daily injustice. The great, sacrificial love that comes out of a rejection of control, self-serving, or attachments leaves no option but to face injustice and to intervene. There is no indifference when it comes to injustice.

Mahatma Gandhi often illustrated a deeply non-attached spirituality which forms outward action. His "theory seamlessly fuses the inner individual life with the social interpersonal life."¹⁴ Researcher and great-granddaughter of Gandhi, Leela Gandhi reflects on this interaction in her journal article "Concerning Violence": "it is with reference to the liberating and regulatory effects of the 'inner voice' or 'conscience' that [Gandhi] is also able to urge individual acts of civil disobedience against the colonial state."¹⁵ Not only was Gandhi fueled by his individual spiritual disciplines like non-attachment, but he invited the collective into this path of resistance.

Indian social activist and movement leader Swami Agnivesh taught on letting go of power, position, and possessions, while doing precisely so himself. On the basis of his observation that "Conflicts are endemic to power because power breeds insecurity," he goes on to claim that power is stuck operating at the superficial level, rather than at the depth of spirituality.¹⁶ Discussing creating a culture of ahimsa (peace), he encourages conflict transformers that "Spirituality comes with an invitation to shift from this foundation [of materialism and consumerism]."¹⁵ As we continue to explore the spirituality of letting go, we should take heed of his subsequent teaching,

"This does not involve any indifference to things worldly. Rather this enhances the duty to develop everything entrusted to us. But what this outlook changes is the significance we attach to the fruits of our labor and, more importantly, our sense of exclusive ownership as far as the fruits of our labor are concerned."¹⁵

¹³ David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 220-221.

¹⁴ Nehal A Patel, "Mindful Use: Gandhi's Non-Possessive Property Theory," Seattle University School of Law Digital Commons, 2014, <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol13/iss2/5>, 318.

¹⁵ Leela Gandhi, "Concerning Violence: The Limits and Circulations of Gandhian 'AHISMA' or Passive Resistance," *Cultural Critique*, no. 35 (1996): 105, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354573>, 117.

¹⁶ Swami Agnivesh, "Processes of Reconciliation in India," essay, in *Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation Multifarious Ideals and Realities* (Amsterdam - New York: Rodopi, 2002), 251-59, 252, 258-259.

Swami Agnivesh, in becoming a *sanyasi*, surrendered his position in a devout Brahman family and gave up all of his possessions, only to commit his life deeply and fully to social and economic justice, caste abolition, labor rights, and what his party called “social spirituality.” He co-founded a political party that rejected materialism, led marches, launched a campaign against female foeticide, was arrested as he welcomed dalits into the temple, and took many more actions that swayed public opinion, catalyzed legislation, and reformed his society. With the credibility of his own experience of letting go, Swami Agnivesh declared that “The lust for grasping and grabbing will be replaced by the joy of sharing.”¹⁵ Truly, never with power other than that of love which moves at depth, he shared generously.

Returning to David Cortright’s passage, Rev. King similarly viewed his spiritual life as making proactive demands in community life. Cortright writes,

“Like Gandhi, King conceived of this selfless love as proactive. Agape is not passive but active, an affirmative commitment. Christ’s command to love, King wrote, is also a command to resist evil and work for justice. Just as Gandhi believed that the Hindu practice of ahimsa requires active opposition to evil, so King believed that the Christian concept of agape includes an obligation to work for social justice.”¹⁷

Each of these liberation leaders was able to allow the uniqueness of their spiritual discipline of nonattachment to clarify and undergird their determined, suffering-filled road to liberation.

Indeed, they didn’t just do so separately, solely within their own region or context. Rev. King “credited Gandhi with bringing the Christian principle of agape , or self-sacrificing love , to bear on social relations by creating social movements aimed at changing existing social structures.”¹⁸ Mahatma Gandhi—famously a reader of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount—intentionally added agape to his notion of nonviolence.¹⁹

So, the question follows: what are the ways non-attachment—manifested as anasakti and agape—can be used for peacebuilding and justice movement-building?

¹⁷ David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 221.

¹⁸ 1. Michael K. Duffey and Deborah S. Nash, *Justice and Mercy Shall Kiss: The Vocation of Peacemaking in a World of Many Faiths* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008), 149.

¹⁹ Michael K. Duffey and Deborah S. Nash, *Justice and Mercy Shall Kiss: The Vocation of Peacemaking in a World of Many Faiths* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008), 154.

Non-attachment Functions in Peacebuilding and Justice Movement-Building Efforts

A clear utility of non-attached, disinterested, unconditional love is its capacity to break categories of individualism. When oppressor or oppressed alike are met with this kind of love, it is startling and they must adapt to it. As Leela Gandhi puts it, "...universal love and suffering—eventually come into conflict with the structures of individuation within which affection and pain are ultimately situated."²⁰ This kind of love is essentially inviting. There is great power to be unlocked when the peacemaker embodies selfless unconditional love, and when the justice-seeker is willing to be harmed but unwilling to harm.

For the rest of the functions of non-attachment practices in peacebuilding explored in this paper, it is essential to be reminded: Inherent in non-attachment is the embrace of a lack of control. Emptying. Letting go. Peacebuilders and those who experience violence and oppression—whether they call it “non-attachment” or not—often carry a resolve and indifference to continually violent outcomes. John Paul Lederach calls this “the gift of pessimism.” In *The Moral Imagination : The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, he emphasizes:

“Theirs is not the indifference of apathy. It is the indifference of the heroic but everyday journey. They do not allow repeated cycles of violence to kill their passion for life or derail their daily journey. They keep walking the terrain in spite of the violence. This requires a selective indifference: These particular events that are out of my control will not restrict or destroy my life. When these events are repeated over and over again, across decades and generations, it creates the pessimism of survival. The space where selective indifference and hope meet gives birth to an extraordinary irony: Pessimism is a gift for survival.”²¹

“Selective indifference” is quite akin to the yoga of *anasakti* in particular, which is one’s detachment from outcomes that Swami Agnivesh also emphasized. According to Lederach, such a disposition does not impede, but rather enhances the chances of success for conflict transformation. Peacebuilders adopting this way of selective detachment are moved toward authenticity in peace, settling for nothing less.

²⁰ Leela Gandhi, “Concerning Violence: The Limits and Circulations of Gandhian ‘AHISMA’ or Passive Resistance,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 35 (1996): 105, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354573>, 108.

²¹ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 55.

The third way that non-attachment can function in peacebuilding and restorative justice is forgiveness. When parties have accepted not only potential adverse outcomes, but histories of harm as well, they are in a better position for reconciliation. If an oppressor has harmed, they have a higher chance of reaching a restored relationship by humbling themselves, confessing, and being willing to accept rejection or even retaliation when they seek forgiveness. Through extending forgiveness—whether requested from them or not—one who is oppressed may also reclaim their own dignity and inner peace when recognizing they cannot change the past nor force a better future. In *The Human Condition*, Jewish philosopher, political theorist, and Holocaust survivor Hannah Arendt shares “The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done—is the faculty of forgiving.”²² Forgiveness makes way for redemption and reconciliation; forgiveness is made possible only by letting go.

Aside from these three applications—(1) breaking individualism/inviting collectivism, (2) the gift of pessimism, and (3) the capability of forgiveness—non-attachment has much to offer to ever-evolving creative nonviolent resistance movements, as well as to emerging frameworks in the conflict transformation field such as Adaptive Peacebuilding. In recent years, in attempt to meet today’s trends of armed conflict globally, peacebuilding scholar Cedric de Coning developed the adaptive peacebuilding approach as “a pragmatic and complexity-informed approach where peacebuilders and communities affected by conflict actively engage in a structured process to sustain peace.”²³ As an alternative to determined-designed peacebuilding approaches, it is uniquely iterative and locally, contextually specific. Even with its focus on locally developed institutions, agreements, solutions, etc., like many of the frameworks and methodologies originating in the West²⁴, as it is written this framework shies away from engaging in spiritual or religious inspirations, like non-attachment. Non-attachment can offer a starting point for those wishing to use adaptive peacebuilding, as it prepares practitioners to listen rather than impose, and to accept the fullness and complexity of the people in front of them.

Emerging Applications of Non-attachment in Peace and Justice

Peacebuilders, advocates, and revolutionaries across religions and across history have been using non-attachment spiritual practices to build a better world—from 2nd century Eastern Christian

²² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 6th ed. (University Chicago Press, 1970), 237.

²³ Cedric De Coning, Rui Saraiva, and Ako Muto, *Adaptive Peacebuilding: A New Approach to Sustaining Peace in the 21st Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 9.

²⁴ Mohammad Abu-Nimer, “Religion and Peacebuilding,” essay, in *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding* (Mac Ginty, 2013), 69–79, 72.

ascetics to Hindu social activist Swami Agnivesh of the last few decades. Here in the 21st century, there are yet emerging applications of non-attachment in peace and justice. For example in Syria as of 2023, there are many international actors with competing interests along with arduous mediations; detachment from these interests and conventional processes would and has been yielding more promising pathways for sustainable, locally-rooted peace.²⁵ Non-attachment not only has applications in political conflicts, but climate justice as well: with an ever-changing Earth due to destructive human practices, groups of climate justice advocates like those at Waging Nonviolence are considering taking up non-attachment as a way to grieve what has been and will inevitably be lost and to fuel creativity and fluidity in new solutions. Out of love for the Earth and for Humanity, climate-change adaptation will require “letting go”. Christians and Muslims Palestinians experience liberation (a kind that those of us who are far away can only hope to glimpse) in the face of never-ending, ever-escalating suffering, by declaring “God is my portion and God is judge,” recognizing that outcomes are ultimately God’s responsibility. There is much to be explored and questioned even as we embrace the centuries of wisdom of non-attached love for the purposes of justice and peace.

Recommendations for Further Research

Many stones of non-attachment for peace and justice have been left unturned by this paper, hence more research (and practice) is encouraged. Particularly, future research could focus on variations between non-attachment’s uses in peacebuilding, non-attachment’s use in interfaith contexts, non-attachment as it relates to feminine-character resistance such as ahimsa (no-harm, most notable in Jainism) or rahma (mercy, most notable in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) in response to masculine-character war-making and colonialism, present-day examples of non-attachment in activism, or the limitations of non-attachment as a tool for peace and justice. On the last point, this paper only partially addressed the concerns of critics and my fellow faith-motivated activists as we react to religious cultures of silence and apathy in the face of injustice.

Conclusion

In this paper, we’ve explored the horizon of non-attachment spiritual practices in peacebuilding and justice movements. With a core of non-attachment, compassionate spiritual practices of Hindu anasakti yoga and Christian agape love have set themselves deep within religious liberation leaders

²⁵ Cedric De Coning, Rui Saraiva, and Ako Muto, *Adaptive Peacebuilding: A New Approach to Sustaining Peace in the 21st Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 179-200.

Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Agnivesh, and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Non-attachment has functions in the peace and justice field that include but are not limited to breaking individualism/inviting collectivism, health pessimism & a bent toward authenticity, the capability of forgiveness, motivating context-specific, sustainable adaptive peacebuilding. Because of the openness inherent in non-attachment, there are many possibilities for the peace and justice practitioners to creatively apply such a spiritual practice to invite peace and justice in specific contexts; the expanse of uses of agape, anasakti, and other non-attachment practices is arguably yet to be discovered by the next person seeking peace.

How Might Peacebuilders Take Up Vulnerability and “Letting Go” of Control

This paper will conclude with suggestions for such a person: John Paul Lederach encourages one to approach “social change with awe and humility [as this] opens the way for the moral imagination”; peacebuilders are to “come to see themselves as part of something, not as in control of something.”²⁶ In pursuing non-attachment, peacebuilders may choose to care more about the people involved than the process to reach a desired outcome; “non-attached” practitioners have the openness to use collective imagination and appreciative inquiry in creating the peace or justice process itself. In the hands of an experienced peace and justice practitioner and educator, non-attachment to control, born out of and giving birth to radical love, sounds like the following: “To reconcile requires a commitment to see the face of God in the other, to feel the world from their perspective, and to place ourselves not in control of but alongside the human experience and condition.”²⁷ Letting go of power, we embrace each other, and our own self: the beginning of peace.

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²⁶ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 108.

²⁷ John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2014).

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