



Research Article

YOGI VEMANA'S TIMELESS VERSES: A BEACON OF AHIMSA AND COMPASSION IN A COMPLEX WORLD

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ABSTRACT

In exploring the timeless verses of Yogi Vemana, a Telugu poet-saint from the 17th and 18th centuries deeply rooted in the spiritual landscape of Indian religions, the principle of ahimsa shines forth as a distinctive beacon of love and compassion. The article delves into Vemana's advocacy for non-violence, unravelling the layers of his ethical stance against animal cruelty and shedding light on enduring wisdom that underscores compassion and equality for all living beings. Vemana's unequivocal rejection of violence and heartfelt pleas for empathy resonate as a timeless call to cultivate inner peace and extend it to the world. His condemnation of needless violence extends to both human and animal realms, emphasizing the enduring importance of ahimsa in fostering a more compassionate and ethical world. Vemana's verses, encompassing ethical imperatives against taking lives and cautionary tales about the consequences of transgressing non-violence, serve as potent guides for navigating the complexities of our shared existence. In a world grappling with contemporary concerns about the treatment of sentient beings, Vemana's words stand as a beacon, urging a collective embrace of the transformative power of kindness and the pursuit of a more harmonious coexistence on our planet.

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INTRODUCTION

In a world where the tapestry of religions weaves common threads of love and compassion, the principle of ahimsa, or non-violence, stands as a distinctive beacon within the spiritual landscape of Indian religions. Rooted in the teachings of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, ahimsa transcends the boundaries of abstaining from harm to humans; it extends to a universal philosophy of compassion toward all living beings. In this exploration, we delve into the timeless verses of Yogi Vemana, a 17th and 18th -century Telugu poet-saint whose poetic tapestry articulates a profound advocacy for ahimsa. As we navigate through his verses, we unravel the layers of Vemana's ethical stance against animal cruelty, shedding light on the enduring wisdom that underscores the value of compassion and equality for all living beings. From his unequivocal rejection of violence to poignant pleas for empathy, Vemana's words resonate as a timeless call to cultivate peace within and extend it to the world, reinforcing the age-old concept deeply rooted in the wisdom of ancient Indian sages.

Vemana unequivocally advocates against the act of taking the lives of other beings, emphasizing the ethical imperative with the words, "If we kill, sin is contracted; by not slaying, virtue attaches" (Brown 1100). In this succinct statement, Vemana encapsulates the profound moral principle that refraining from causing harm leads to the accrual of virtue while killing incurs

sin. The poet's perspective resonates with the broader theme of non-violence prevalent in various philosophical traditions, highlighting the enduring wisdom that underscores the value of compassion and the avoidance of harm to all living beings. Vemana conveys a powerful message of compassion and forgiveness in his poems. The poet advises against harming an enemy, even one deserving of death, and instead urges to extend a hand of assistance. Vemana suggests that sparing the life of an adversary and providing aid amounts to a form of death in itself. This poetic expression encapsulates the timeless wisdom of choosing mercy over vengeance, emphasizing the transformative power of kindness and the ability to break the cycle of hatred. It is a timeless reminder that embracing compassion can be a more potent force for change than perpetuating violence in the face of animosity.

*If an enemy deserving of death falls into your hands,
You must not harm him.*

Help him and send him off:

That itself is death. (Moorty and Roberts 116)

Vemana beautifully articulates his profound message of ahimsa (non-violence) and inner transformation in his poem. Vemana emphatically declares that one should refrain from killing anyone, urging individuals to direct their efforts toward extinguishing hostility within themselves. The metaphorical comparison between a scorpion and one's animosity is particularly striking. The poet ingeniously conveys that

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eliminating the source of enmity renders it powerless, much like removing a scorpion's tail prevents it from stinging. Vemana's verses inspire reflection on the transformative potential of addressing one's inner conflicts and fostering a spirit of non-violence, offering a timeless lesson on cultivating peace within before seeking it in the world.

*However cruel, kill not anyone,
Surely kill cruelty in everyone;
What harm can the scorpion do
When its tail is cut into two? (Murty 83)*

Vemana, in numerous verses, expressed a vehement stance against animal cruelty, specifically targeting those who engage in the slaughter of animals for meat consumption. In one such verse, he sharply criticizes individuals who, despite having their own sustenance provided, choose to needlessly and guiltlessly kill animals for their flesh. The poet's words highlight the ethical dilemma surrounding the unnecessary harm inflicted on animals for human consumption, urging contemplation on the morality of such actions. Vemana's verses stand as a powerful admonition against the senseless taking of lives and advocate for a more compassionate and conscientious approach to our interactions with the animal kingdom. He condemns those who "slay animals without any offence and guilty and eat them." (Brown 582)

Vemana unveils a profound call for empathy and self-awareness in his contemplative verses. He invites those who consume meat to reflect on the interconnectedness of all living beings by drawing a parallel between their own flesh and that of the animals they consume. The poet poignantly highlights the delusion that leads individuals to consume the flesh of other creatures while unaware of their own embodiment. Through the metaphor of taking flesh as a covering, Vemana contemplates the consequences of this deception. Vemana's verses encourage a deeper introspection into the ethical dimensions of our actions and the interconnectedness of all life: "Taking the flesh as a covering does the deceived creature devour flesh. If he were released from the flesh could he speak?" (Brown 781)

Vemana eloquently conveys a plea for empathy towards animals in his poem. He advocates against the act of killing animals by underscoring their shared existence with humans. He prompts reflection on the commonality of birth and life on earth, emphasizing that animals, too, experience life much like humans do. The poet's poignant words question the morality of taking the life of a creature endowed with instinct. Vemana's verses serve as a heartfelt reminder of the interconnectedness of all living beings and encourage a thoughtful reconsideration of our treatment of animals, urging a compassionate and ethical perspective: "Were not they born as ourselves in the earth? Have they not a life like ours? Oh! What an act is it to slay an animal that has instinct." (Brown 632)

Vemana extends his condemnation to those who engage in the act of slaughtering animals, pronouncing a curse upon them. He asserts that those individuals who cunningly destroy animals, whether amid slumber, while partaking in water, or in the act of singing while standing still, shall ultimately similarly meet their demise. The poet's words clearly warn about the karmic consequences awaiting those who harm innocent creatures. Vemana's verse serves as a potent reminder of the interconnectedness of actions and their

repercussions, emphasizing the poetic justice that awaits those involved in the unjust treatment of animals: "Those wretches (lives) that artfully destroy animals while either sleeping, drinking waters or standing still and singing shall at the end in the same manner perish." (Brown 1077)

Vemana foretells the ominous fate awaiting the heartless, envisaging their life to culminate in the engulfing flames, the depths of water, or the clutches of ruthless robbers. The poet paints a vivid picture of the harsh destiny that befalls those devoid of compassion. According to Vemana, individuals lacking kindness are destined to become prey to the relentless grasp of fire, witness their existence waste away in the watery abyss, or become the unfortunate spoils of cruel plunderers. Through these stark metaphors, Vemana communicates a profound warning about the inevitable consequences that await those who lead lives devoid of empathy and compassion: "So hard a wretch becomes the possession of the flame. The life (man) void of kindness shall waste away in water; the soul full of cruelty shall be the portion of cruel plunderers." (Brown 618)

Vemana vividly illustrates the harsh treatment of animals, lamenting the brutality inflicted upon them. He poignantly describes a grim reality where people, without mercy, sever the throats of animals with tails. The poet goes on to depict a scene of cruelty, where the necks of all the goats in the flocks are callously broken, and the remaining animals are subjected to the grim fate of being burned and consumed. Through these evocative images, Vemana sheds light on the stark and heart-wrenching practices of violence against animals, compelling reflection on the ethical dimensions of human actions and the need for compassion in treating the sentient beings we share the earth with: "Animals that have tails, they get and cut their throats, They break the necks of all the goats of the flocks and as for the rest of the animals they burn and eat them." (Brown 1131)

Vemana consistently addresses themes of violence and animal cruelty across his verses; the current one is no exception. In this particular verse, he strongly condemns the actions of a heartless hunter, emphasizing the severity of his deeds. Vemana asserts that the body of a hunter who callously severs the mothers and their young, particularly creatures with heads (excluding fruits perceived as headless animals), will hold no value even in death. The poet paints a vivid image of the hunter's grim fate, stating that his earthly remains shall be useless upon his demise, not even to vultures. Through this stark portrayal, Vemana underscores the gravity of such violent actions and conveys a profound message about the ethical consequences that accompany acts of cruelty: "The stone hearted hunter, who severs the mothers and the young of creatures that have heads (fruits are considered as animals void of heads) – when this hunter dies in the earth, when he falls on the ground, he shall be, of no use even to vultures." (Brown 631)

Vemana extols the virtue of non-violence and unequivocally asserts that those who engage in the oppression of animals, consistently taking lives from their very birth, are destined to be engulfed in a garden bed of sin. The poet poses a rhetorical question, challenging the prospect of salvation for those who perpetuate such malevolent deeds. Through this contemplative verse, Vemana underscores the inherent contradiction between a life steeped in violence and the pursuit of spiritual well-

being, emphasizing the incompatibility of cruelty with the attainment of beatitude or ultimate bliss: "From their birth, they continually slay all animals and become the garden bed of sin. Shall beatitude be attained by evil doers?" (Brown 1130)

While the act of slaughtering animals is generally considered a sin in Hindu society, a distinctive emphasis is placed on the sanctity of cows, deeming the killing of cows as a greater transgression. This distinction may stem from the cow's utility and gentle nature. Vemana, aligning with this sentiment, vehemently condemns cow slaughtering, warning that anyone, even a person of nobility, who commits such an act is bound to face dire consequences. The poet vividly expresses the gravity of the crime by asserting that the perpetrator, akin to a sacrificial goat bound for Yama, the God of death, cannot escape the inevitable repercussions of their actions. Vemana's verse underscores the cultural and moral significance attached to the protection of cows in Hindu society, reinforcing the severe consequences associated with their intentional harm: "If a noble person comes and kills a cow, his crime can by no means be evaded, and at last, he is surely to Yama as a goat bound for sacrifice." (Brown 1047)

Vemana advocates for non-violence even towards seemingly cruel animals, offering a cautionary tale to underscore the consequences of transgressing this ethic. He recounts an incident from the past where a Boya man, perceiving a roaring tiger in the forest as a cruel threat, chose to slay it. However, the poet highlights that the very sin incurred by this act turned against the Boya, leading to his destruction. Through this narrative, Vemana imparts a profound lesson on the interconnectedness of actions and their repercussions. The example serves as a poignant reminder that even in dealing with creatures perceived as threatening, a moral imperative exists to refrain from unnecessary harm, as the consequences of such actions may ultimately rebound upon the perpetrator. Such an attitude helps preserve the biodiversity of nature on earth: "In former time in the world a boya man, when a tiger roared in the forests, held it to be a cruel beast, and slew it. The sin that he incurred hereby seized the Boya and whelmed him." (Brown 1129)

Vemana castigates individuals who resort to mortgaging innocent animals in times of financial obligation. He denounces such actions by characterizing those who exploit the vulnerability of innocent creatures for personal gain as nothing short of brutish. The poet's choice of words underscores the moral reprehensibility of using animals as collateral, highlighting a lack of empathy and ethical consideration. Those who prioritize their own interests at the expense of the welfare of defenceless animals and "mortgages from them, these are themselves the most brutish in the earth." (Brown 658)

Yogi Vemana's poetic odyssey through the realms of ahimsa leaves an indelible mark, echoing the profound wisdom of ancient Indian sages and reinforcing the timeless concept of compassion and equality for all living beings. From his unequivocal rejection of violence to poignant pleas for empathy, Vemana's verses serve as a timeless call to cultivate inner peace and extend it to the world. The poet's ethical stance against animal cruelty transcends the boundaries of time, resonating with contemporary concerns about the treatment of sentient beings. His condemnation of needless violence, whether toward humans or animals, underscores the enduring importance of ahimsa in fostering a more compassionate and ethical world. As we reflect on Vemana's verses, we are reminded that the principles of non-violence, compassion, and interconnectedness are not mere philosophical ideals but potent guides for navigating the complexities of our shared existence. In a world hungering for empathy and ethical awakening, Vemana's words stand as a beacon, urging us to embrace the transformative power of kindness and break the cycle of hatred, ultimately fostering a more harmonious coexistence on our planet.

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