

Third Class University Essays



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CLASS OF NONVIOLENCE

The Doctrine of the Sword

By Mohandas Gandhi

In this age of the rule of brute force, it is almost impossible for any one to believe that any one else could possibly reject the awe of the final supremacy of brute force. And so I receive anonymous letters advising me that I must not interfere with the progress of noncooperation, even though popular violence may break out. Others come to me and, assuming that secretly I must be plotting violence, inquire when the happy moment for declaring open violence is to arrive. They assure me that the English will never yield to anything but violence, secret or open. Yet others, I am informed, believe that I am the most rascally person living in India, because I never give out my real intention and that they have not a shadow of a doubt that I believe in violence just as much as most people do.

Such being the hold that the doctrine of the sword has on the majority of mankind, and as a success of noncooperation depends principally on the absence of violence during its pendency and as my views in this matter affect the conduct of a large number of people, I am anxious to state them as clearly as possible.

I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. Thus when my eldest son asked me what he should have done, had he been present when I was almost fatally assaulted in 1908, whether he should have run away and seen me killed or whether he should have used his physical force, which he could and wanted to use, and defended me, I told him it was his duty to defend me even by using violence. Hence it was that I took part in the Boer War, the so-called Zulu Rebellion, and

the late war. Hence also do I advocate training in arms for those who believe in the method of violence. I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honor than that she should in a cowardly manner become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonor.

But I believe that nonviolence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment. Forgiveness adorns the soldier. But abstinence is forgiveness only when there is power to punish: it is meaningless when it pretends to proceed from a helpless creature. A mouse hardly forgives a cat when it allows itself to be torn to pieces by her. I therefore appreciate the sentiment of those who cry out for the condign punishment of General Dyer and his ilk. They would tear him to pieces if they could. But I do not believe India to be helpless. I do not believe myself to be a helpless creature. Only I want to use India's and my strength for a better purpose.

Let me not be misunderstood. Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will. An average Zulu is any way more than a match for an average Englishman in bodily capacity. But he flees from an English boy, because he fears the boy's revolver or those who will use it for him. He fears death and is nerveless in spite of his burly figure. We in India may in a moment realize that 100,000 Englishmen need not frighten 300 million human beings. A definite forgiveness would therefore mean a definite recognition of our strength. With enlightened forgiveness must come a mighty wave of strength in us, which would make it impossible for a Dyer and a Frank Johnson

to heap affront upon India's devoted head. It matters little to me that for the moment I do not drive my point home. We feel too downtrodden not to be angry and revengeful. But I must not refrain from saying that India can gain more by waiving the right of punishment. We have better work to do, a better mission to deliver to the world.

I am not a visionary. I claim to be a practical idealist. The religion of nonviolence is not meant merely for the Rishis¹ and saints. It is meant for the common people as well. Nonviolence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law – to the strength of the spirit.

I have therefore ventured to place before India the ancient law of self-sacrifice. For satyagraha and its offshoots, noncooperation and civil resistance, are nothing but new names for the law of suffering. The Rishis, who discovered the law of nonviolence in the midst of violence, were greater geniuses than Newton. They were themselves greater warriors than Wellington. Having themselves known the use of arms, they realized their uselessness and taught a weary world that its salvation lay not through violence but through nonviolence.

Nonviolence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evildoer, but it means the putting of one's whole soul against the

will of the tyrant. Working under the law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honor, his religion, his soul, and lay the foundation for that empire's fall or its regeneration.

And so I am not pleading for India to practice nonviolence, because she is weak. I want her to practice nonviolence being conscious of her strength and power. No training in arms is required for realization of her strength. We seem to need it, because we seem to think that we are but a lump of flesh. I want India to recognize that she has a soul that cannot perish. And that can rise triumphant above every physical weakness and defy the physical combination of a whole world. What is the meaning of Rama², a mere human being, with his host of monkeys, pitting himself against the insolent strength of 10-headed Ravan surrounded in supposed safety by the raging waters on all sides of Lanka? Does it not mean the conquest of physical might by spiritual strength? However, being a practical man, I do not wait till India recognizes the practicability of the spiritual life in the political world. India considers herself to be powerless and paralyzed before the machine guns, the tanks and the aeroplanes of the British. And she takes up noncooperation out of her weakness. It must still serve the same purpose, namely, bringing her delivery from the crushing weight of British injustice, if a sufficient number of people practice it.

I isolate this noncooperation from Sinn Feinism³, for, it is so conceived as to be offered side by side with violence. But I invite even the school of violence to give this peaceful noncooperation a trial. It will not fail through its inherent weakness. It may fail

because of poverty of response. Then will be the time for real danger. The high-souled men, who are unable to suffer national humiliation any longer, will want to vent their wrath. They will take to violence. So far as I know, they must perish without delivering themselves or their country from the wrong. If India takes up the doctrine of the sword, she may gain a momentary victory. Then India will cease to be the pride of my heart. I am wedded to India, because I owe my all to her. I believe absolutely that she has a mission for the world. She is not to copy Europe blindly. India's acceptance of the doctrine of the sword will be the hour of my trial. I hope I shall not be found wanting. My religion has no geographical limits. If I have a living faith in it, it will transcend my love for India herself. My life is dedicated to service of India through the religion of nonviolence which I believe to be the root of Hinduism.

Meanwhile, I urge those who distrust me not to disturb the even working of the struggle that has just commenced by inciting to violence in the belief that I want violence. I detest secrecy as sin. Let them give nonviolent noncooperation a trial and they will find that I had no mental reservation whatsoever.

NOTES:

¹ In Hinduism the Rishis are Holy sages, one of those to whom the mantras and hymns of the Vedas (sacred texts) were revealed. In the epic poems and Puranas the Rishis are regarded as a particular class of beings, distinct from gods and men, the patriarchs or 'creators.' The seven great Rishis - Marichi Atri Angiras, Pulaha, Kratu, Pulastya, Vasishtha are associated with the Big Dipper constellation.

² It is believed that Vishnu, the protector of the universe, would have 10 incarnations that would come down to earth to help mankind. At one time, there was an evil demon named Ravana, that all the other gods feared so much they asked Vishnu, the protector of the universe, to help them destroy him. Brahma had promised Ravana that none of the gods would be able to destroy him, so Vishnu promised the gods he would descend to the earth in human form. Vishnu was born on this earth as Rama, the son of a powerful king. With his wife, Sita, and the Monkey King, Hanuman, Rama went to Ravana's kingdom of Lanka, and was able to destroy Ravana.

³ In the 1920s, when Gandhi was writing, Sinn Fein (Ourselves Alone, pronounced shin fane), was a separatist political group in Northern Ireland; the militant Irish Republican Army (IRA) was part of Sinn Fein.

Gandhi in the Postmodern Age

by Sanford Krolick and Betty Cannon

The theory of nonviolence as an offspring of democracy is still in its infancy. Mohandas Gandhi, the master of this philosophy and its methods, was educated in Britain as a lawyer and learned well the principles of democracy. Throughout his years in South Africa and in the campaign for Indian independence, his efforts in dealing with conflict were consistent with the basic beliefs of democracy. While others fought revolutions promising that victory would bring democracy, Gandhi brought about revolutions using democratic principles and techniques; his victories were signified by the acceptance of democracy. Gandhi never tired of talking about the means and ends, claiming that the means used in settling the dispute between the Indian people and the British Government would determine the type of government India would evolve. He was fond of saying that if the right means are used, the ends will take care of themselves.

Gandhi called his philosophy Satyagraha. In the United States it has been called nonviolence, direct action, and civil disobedience. These terms are inadequate because they only denote specific techniques Gandhi used. However, for the purposes of this discussion, we will use nonviolence to designate the philosophy and resisters to designate those who adopt this philosophy and carry out its methods.

The basic principle of nonviolence is to seek negotiations. The goal of a nonviolent movement is to establish an atmosphere that leads to a successfully negotiated agreement and thereby establishes the basis

for compromise in the settlement of future conflicts.

The first step in a nonviolent campaign is for the resisters to define the minimum terms that they would accept in negotiations. Their minimum demands must be precisely that; every effort should be made to ensure that all resisters and opponents clearly understand this, because once at the negotiation table, these demands must not be conceded. They should reflect the fundamental principle involved. The price of bus fare was irrelevant to the freedom riders. The right of each individual to choose where he wished to sit was fundamental to the recognition of the principle of equal treatment regardless of race.

There are pragmatic as well as philosophical reasons for demanding the minimum terms. A statement of maximum demands can put the opponent on the defensive, and perhaps make him feel that the resisters have mapped out a master plan for the future that affords little latitude for expressing his ideas and needs. He would then believe that negotiations would result in his being forced to capitulate rather than in his gaining an honorable agreement.

Too many demands may be confusing. Dissatisfaction and disunity can result if serious negotiations reveal that the leaders and participants have different priorities. Furthermore, the opponent might seek a solution to what he believes is the main point but which is only of marginal importance to the resisters, and thus end up disgusted when his efforts do not yield settlement. More important, the opponent

must clearly understand that the resisters cannot be “bought off” by minor or irrelevant concessions that do not recognize the fundamental principles involved. Thus the minimum demands must be stated at the beginning, repeated continuously, and upheld throughout the negotiations. The resisters must not accept any settlement that fails to recognize these demands unless they become convinced their position is incorrect. If the resisters are purists, as Gandhi was, they will also refuse to abide by an agreement to which the opponent concedes (possibly out of frustration) if he is not convinced of the validity of the resisters’ position.

Publicity about the movement and its objectives is essential for educating the opponent, the participants, and the public. Resisters should pursue publicity with unrelenting enthusiasm, either on their own using a duplicating or copying machine or through newspapers and national television. They must publish the objectives, the strategy, and the tactics of the campaign. Secrecy has no place in a nonviolent campaign; it serves only to destroy communications with the participants and invite suspicion from the public and the opponent.

In a nonviolent campaign the opponent must always be informed ahead of time of the precise course of any action that is planned—for example, the exact route a demonstration intends to follow. This is particularly important if confrontation is likely since it reduces the possibility of violence through panic on either side. Of course, the authorities can thwart action by arresting resisters ahead of time, but plans that have been well publicized can arouse sympathy and attract support.

Publicity should also be understood as a form of communication that lays the groundwork for agreement. Until the opponent agrees to formal negotiations, publicity should be treated as a substitute. Honesty and accuracy are critical, as is the avoidance of any derogatory or slanderous statements. Insults from the opponent are best ignored. The movement will be judged by the honesty and fairness with which its case is presented.

The resisters’ communications should indicate that they are listening as well as talking and are willing to admit a mistake or miscalculation. These steps must be continued throughout the movement until final agreement is reached. They are the basic tools for airing differences and settling disputes within a democratic framework.

Such activities may evoke a violent response from authorities who hope to quell the movement quickly. They might also bring a sympathetic offer to negotiate. However, it is most likely they will bring no response at all. Most nonviolent groups are destroyed by neglect, not by action. Finding their proposals are ignored, not even dignified by a response or reaction, resisters become stifled and the movement dissolves. Perhaps this is why pacifism has been considered weak and ineffective in America. It is all too easy for frustration to lead to violence. When this happens the resisters have lost the initiative.

Keeping the Initiative

Gandhi’s most important contribution to the theory of nonviolence was his insistence that the resisters must keep the initiative at all times. While the opponent must be given ample opportunity to consider the proposals, he must not be allowed to ignore

them. Gandhi fully understood that half the battle, indeed often the most difficult part of the battle, is to convince the opponent that he must deal with resisters. Even in using force the opponent becomes involved in a relationship with the movement and makes a commitment to resolving the issue. .

If the minimum demands of the resisters have been clearly formulated and extensively publicized, and if every avenue to the establishment of negotiations has been tried but the opponent has either refused to negotiate or will not deal with the minimum demands, then nonviolent direct action is necessary if the resisters are to keep the initiative. Direct action should be pursued only when all other alternatives, with the exception of violence, have been tried. The focus of the action must be carefully chosen, for it must both demonstrate the problem and elicit a response from the opponent. The action must leave the opponent latitude for response; above all, it must allow for face saving. While action should be dramatic, it should not be presented in a way that calls for surrender or capitulation of the opponent. A creatively negotiated settlement between equals remains the objective.

No matter what the response of the opponent may be, he must always be treated with the respect and dignity that the resisters are seeking for themselves. In actual practice, there are only a few times during a nonviolent campaign when direct action is truly necessary. During 25 years of almost continuous nonviolent activities, Gandhi used organized direct action fewer than 10 times.

The major techniques of direct action fall under two headings: noncooperation and civil disobedience. The techniques of

noncooperation include mass rallies, strikes, picketing, and boycotts. The grape workers' campaign led by Cesar Chavez illustrates these techniques. The aim of the grape workers was honorable negotiations. They wanted to be recognized as a union with the right to bargain collectively with growers for wages, hours, and benefits. The workers established a union hall and held mass meetings throughout the campaign. When the growers were not willing to negotiate, the workers voted to go on strike, refusing to cooperate in harvesting the crop. The growers responded by hiring other migrants and some seasonal workers from Mexico.

The resisters then established picket lines near the farms in hope of gaining the cooperation of the strike breakers. Although this tactic continued daily for many months, it was not successful in preventing the harvest or in gaining negotiations with the growers. Chavez then decided to initiate a nationwide boycott of grapes. He sent the young people who had come to California to offer their support to the movement back to the cities to organize the boycott. This move widened the issue by creating interest and involvement across the nation. The individual shopper's decision about purchasing grapes was less crucial than the involvement of established union members who refused to cross picket lines to ship and handle grapes. In September 1966 the grape workers voted for the union with which the growers agreed to bargain.

The second method of direct action, more suitable to situations that do not involve economic relationships, is civil disobedience. This involves noncooperation with respect to a specific law or set of laws. In using this technique it is essential that all participants disobey only the law or laws specified, while

obeying all others. The point is not to bring the opponent to his knees but to the negotiating table. Great care must be taken in selecting the law to be contravened. It can be central to the grievance or symbolic of it. The more important determinant is the involvement of the participants. From the resister's viewpoint, it should be a law that has regularly affected large groups. The number of people affected by the injustice is more important than the injustice done. This was understood by Martin Luther King Jr., in singling out public lunch counters that refused service to black customers as the issue of the Birmingham, Alabama civil disobedience demonstration. Such humiliation had been experienced by many blacks. The issue emphasized the demand for equal treatment, and the action pointed to the local laws that violated the rights of black citizens.

Civil disobedience is serious business. The deliberate violation of law is virtually guaranteed to evoke response from governmental authorities. The strength, determination, and cohesiveness of the resisters will be tested. Typically, arrests will be made. The ability of the movement to continue with disciplined resisters once the leaders are arrested is crucial. The aim is "to fill the jails," thus jamming the courts while retaining public interest and sympathy.

In Birmingham, King initiated the movement with only 20 resisters. Through nightly mass meetings, volunteers came forth in increasing numbers to fill the places of the men who were jailed. King testified that the

turning point came when he called upon high school students to join the march to city hall, challenging the police barricades and courting arrest. The news service coverage of the march included a picture of a six-year-old being arrested. On May 7, 1963, the Senior Citizens Committee of 125 business leaders of Birmingham met with King. As they walked out on the street for lunch,

... "there were square blocks of Negroes, a veritable sea of black faces. They were committing no violence. They were just present and singing. Downtown Birmingham echoed to the strains of the freedom songs."

King states that when the meeting reconvened. "One of the men who had been in the most determined opposition cleared his throat and said: 'You know, I've been thinking this thing through. We ought to be able to work something out.' "

In their civil disobedience campaigns, both Gandhi and King focused on the ambiguity between the officially stated democratic principles and the clear violation of these principles in practice. "These campaigns compelled the government authorities to choose between ideals and actions. Either they had to renounce their democratic ideals and suppress the resisters by force in order to maintain their dominance, or they had to affirm their ideals, honestly negotiate, and replace dominance with compromise. As the choice became increasingly clear, the response of the authorities to the resisters depended in part on the reaction of the majority of citizens. In this, nonviolence paid tremendous dividends. By 1947 the majority of British citizens were unwilling to support massive repression of India. In 1960 many in the South and North were unwilling to support massive

repression of civil rights marchers.

In a direct action campaign it is essential that the resisters avoid using violence in any form. This is not an end in itself; it is a means of breaking the cycle of fear and repression in order to establish a basis for trust and democratic negotiation. An action cannot be characterized as nonviolent if it is performed out of fear, for that may lead to submission. As Gandhi was fond of saying, the mouse does not exercise nonviolence in allowing the pussycat to eat him. Gandhi also insisted that when one saw no choices except to respond with violence or to submit, violence was the better choice because it afforded more self-respect than did cowardly submission. He emphasized the third alternative, nonviolent resistance, as a conscious choice.

Nonviolence is sterile unless it is coupled with a program to bring about change. A firm commitment to refuse to respond with violence or to submit to fear comes from strength, courage, and self-discipline. Nonviolence is truly the conquest of violence.

Actors and Roles in Nonviolent Confrontation

Perhaps a clearer understanding of nonviolence can be gained if the conflict is viewed in terms of individuals. The average individual approaches a new relationship with mixed feelings. He hopes to gain understanding, respect, and appreciation; he fears that he may suffer rejection, disgrace, or humiliation. Most relationships contain a mixture of these feelings and reactions. The direction in which a relationship develops depends in large part on how conflicts that arise are resolved. If resolution based on understanding, mutual respect, and honesty is found, then a basis of trust is initiated. Each

conflict that is resolved by these methods increases the trust and reinforces feelings of respect and understanding.

In contrast, if a conflict is not settled or is settled in a manner that leads one or both parties to believe that his basic rights and self-respect have been damaged, then feelings of misunderstanding and anger jeopardize the basis of trust. If this pattern is repeated in future conflicts, these feelings are reinforced. The ineffective means of resolving one conflict lays the foundation for dealing with the next, and this has a spiraling effect. Distrust, apprehension, and fear that stem from a lack of trust can come to govern the course of the relationship. As tension mounts each person becomes increasingly suspicious of the other's motives. Each then becomes afraid to yield his power and position because he imagines that his opponents will take advantage of him. Each clings to what he has, refusing to make concessions. Each believes any gain by the other is his loss. Each side thus becomes locked into a position, unable to move for fear of giving the advantage to the other.

Yet the strange part of such a relationship is that each becomes increasingly dependent upon the other. The negative feelings of distrust, anger, and fear tie them together like an invisible bond. Each perceives that he could or would change if he could trust the other, each looks to the other to make the first move for compromise, and each sees the possibility of resolving the situation as depending upon the other. The result is that both are deadlocked in a relationship that they find uncomfortable and threatening, yet one in which each has surrendered his own ability to solve the problem by assigning the

other the responsibility for making the first move to end the deadlock. Each blames the other for the situation, which is only another way of assigning the opponent the power and responsibility for resolving the dispute. If the opponent has the power to create the problem, then he should have the power to resolve it. The ability to exercise creativity, individuality, and initiative is gone.

If the situation escalates, anger and fear build. Each party in the dispute begins to think of the other in dehumanizing ways. Each begins to imagine that the other is evil, and think and talk of him as sinister, scheming, devoid of human sympathy and honor. These thoughts can give rise to self-fulfilling actions; as each opponent spends considerable time scheming, entertaining uncharitable thoughts, and plotting revenge, he does become sinister and increasingly devoid of charity. Total victory—the ability to force the opponent into complete submission—is seen as the only way out of the situation. The appalling fact is that violence can so dehumanize people that they are willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to destroy an opponent.

Nonviolence is a program for breaking the cycle of fear while, at the same time, achieving the desired social or political ends. But it is not without its own risks. Personal injury, legal sanctions, and social criticism are always possibilities. Resisters have to weigh these costs when deciding whether their protest is worth it. Charles Evers, civil rights leader from Mississippi, weighed his participation this way:

“My life would be safe if I shuffled and tommed and said, ‘Yassuh, Mr. Charlie, we niggers is real happy.’ But then I’d be dead already. I’d rather die on my feet than live on my knees.”

In summary, we have presented the basic tenets of nonviolence. Our object has been to describe those tactics that resisters need to follow if they are to engage in nonviolent protest. These include seeking negotiations (where minimum terms have been defined and the objectives of the protest made clear) and keeping the initiative both at the negotiating table and, if necessary, in the streets. Direct action such as noncooperation or civil resistance should be used only if the paths to negotiation are blocked.

These tactics are bound to create tensions in a democratic society. Obviously, if many actions were protested, the society would be in turmoil and the government would probably resort to more and more force to maintain order. Democracy might soon be ended under the guise of protecting it. On the other hand, if governmental decisions and social mores could not be protested, then the system could hardly be called democratic. While majority rule is a fundamental principle, so is the right of a minority to defend itself, its rights, and its interests. Jefferson proclaimed this in 1776. But unlike the tactics that he and his fellow colonists used, the nonviolent resisters of this century have protested within the structure and, for the most part, the rules of the system. For the sake of democracy, it is well that they have done so. Violence threatens the character of the system; nonviolence is a democratic means of conflict resolution.

Family Satyagraha

by Eknath Easwaren

Personal relationships offer fertile ground to learn and use satyagraha. Gandhi called this “domestic satyagraha.” We get a clear idea of what he meant when we look at his early life in South Africa —not, interestingly enough, at satyagraha as he was to develop it later, but as it was used against him. Gandhi was a domineering, sometimes petulant husband during those years in Johannesburg, because he believed, as he recounts, that it was his right to impose his will upon his wife. When Kasturbai objected to his unilateral approach, Gandhi only became more adamant. But Kasturbai had an intuitive grasp of the properties of nonviolent love, and during those tumultuous years of domestic strife, she proved to be Gandhi’s equal. Her attitude transformed his relationship with her and in the process revealed to him the beauty and the power of nonviolent resistance.

“I learnt the lesson of nonviolence from my wife, when I tried to bend her to my will. Her determined resistance to my will, on the one hand, and her quiet submission to the suffering my stupidity involved, on the other, ultimately made me ashamed of myself and cured me of my stupidity...in the end, she became my teacher in nonviolence.”

Without knowing it, Kasturbai had used satyagraha’s foremost weapons to win over her husband: a readiness to suffer rather than retaliate, and an implacable will.

Family satyagraha is founded, like all satyagraha, on this delicate balance of patience and determination, in which, when rightly practiced can become a cornerstone for deep personal relations between men and women. The discovery Gandhi made in his

own household at the turn of the century in Johannesburg is of critical importance today, when these relationships have become fraught with competition and tension. Few homes today seem able to withstand even the predictable tensions of married life. So that estrangement and alienation have become common ingredients in the modern household. At this low ebb, in family living, Gandhi’s way rings especially true: forgive, forbear, support the other person always, and when it becomes necessary to resist, do so lovingly and without rancor. The apex of this ideal is reached when the wife’s welfare becomes more important to the husband than his own happiness, and the husband’s welfare takes on a similar importance to the wife. This kind of relationship marks one of the highest achievements of true ahimsa.

Between parents and children, satyagraha has a natural place. Here again, patience mingled with firmness frames the approach. The “irreducible minimum” in family satyagraha is that the welfare of the children comes first; their growth and development take precedence over everything else. It means making minor sacrifices of small pleasures at times or saying no, gently but firmly, more often than one wants to. Most important, in Gandhi’s thinking, is that the example set by the parents be true to their ideals. When Gandhi moved to Tolstoy Farm in 1909, it was with a motley group of children whom he immediately took under his fatherly wing. They were an “ill-assorted” lot, but in Gandhi’s eyes, he and they were “all one family.” “I saw,” he writes, “that I must be good and live straight, if only for their

sakes.” The seeds of family satyagraha were sown by Gandhi in the rich soil of Tolstoy Farm, and years of careful husbandry brought them into full bloom; in time this demanding relationship with children became a natural, almost effortless attitude for him.

During the thirties a woman came to Sevagram asking Gandhi to get her little boy to stop eating sugar, it was doing him harm. Gandhi gave a cryptic reply: “Please come back next week.”

The woman left puzzled but returned a week later, dutifully following the Mahatma’s instructions. “Please don’t eat sugar,” Gandhi told the young fellow when he saw him. “It is not good for you.” Then he joked with the boy for a while, gave him a hug, and sent him on his way. But the mother, unable to contain her curiosity, lingered behind to ask, “Bapu, why didn’t you say this last week when we came? Why did you make us come back again?”

Gandhi smiled. “Last week,” he said to her. “I too was eating sugar.”

Gandhi was personal in all his relations. Even at the height of the freedom movement in India, he would not allow his campaigns to drift into nonpersonal postures. Regardless of how institutional his opponents might appear behind their marbled corridors and initialed titles, Gandhi’s adversaries were always people first, “tarred with the same brush” and akin to him in their common humanity. Personal relationships were neither a luxury nor an imposition to Gandhi, but rather natural and vital expression of ahimsa; at each level of human interaction they build the forum in which satyagraha operates – It is interesting to watch Gandhi’s circle of friendships gradually evolve from his immediate family in Porbandar and Johannesburg to his many followers living in

his ashrams, until finally it included all India and much of the world.

One of the main features of satyagraha, as we have seen, is its “open-endedness,” its capacity to adapt creatively to new contexts while adhering to its irreducible principles of truth and nonviolence. This flexibility has never been more important than today, when the challenges we face are so different from those Gandhi confronted. Merely to imitate the forms of Gandhi’s political campaigns, such as strikes and demonstrations, would tragically limit satyagraha to the narrow context of political reform. The crises that threaten our lives today are not so much political as spiritual: personal and social matters of alienation, isolation, and increasing polarization between men and women, old and young. Consequently, our times require a determined movement towards nonviolence and unity in our families and communities.

Ahimsa

by Eknath Easwaran

Ahimsa, nonviolence, was the noblest expression of Truth for Gandhi—or, properly speaking, the way to Truth.

“Ahimsa and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin, or rather a smooth unstamped metallic disc. Who can say which is the obverse and which the reverse? Nevertheless ahimsa is the means; truth is the end.”

Ahimsa is the bedrock of Satyagraha, the “irreducible minimum” to which satyagraha adheres and the final measure of its value.

In the traditional lore of India there is a story about an old sannyasi, a Hindu monk, who was sitting on the bank of a river silently repeating his mantram. Nearby a scorpion fell from a tree into the river, and the sannyasi, seeing it struggling in the water, bent over and pulled it out. He placed the scorpion back in the tree, but as he did so, the creature bit him on the hand. He paid no heed to the bite, but went on repeating his mantram. A little while later, the scorpion again fell into the water. As before, the monk pulled him out and set him back in the tree and again was bitten. This little drama was repeated several times, and each time the sannyasi rescued the scorpion, he received a bite.

It happened that a villager, ignorant of the ways of holy men, had come to the river for water and had seen the whole affair. Unable to contain himself any longer, the villager told the sannyasi with some vexation:

“Swamiji, I have seen you save that foolish scorpion several times now and each

time he has bitten you. Why not let the rascal go?”

“Brother,” replied the sannyasi. “the fellow cannot help himself. It is his nature to bite.”

“Agreed,” answered the villager. “But knowing this, why don’t you avoid him?”

“Ah, brother,” replied the monk, “you see, I cannot help myself either. I am a human being; it is my nature to save.”

Ahimsa is usually translated as “nonviolence,” but as we have seen, its meaning goes much beyond that. Ahimsa is derived from the Sanskrit verb root san, which means to kill. The form hims means “desirous to kill”; the prefix a- is a negation. So a-himsa means literally “lacking any desire to kill,” which is perhaps the central theme upon which Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist morality is built. In the Manu Smriti, the great lawbook of Hinduism, it is written, “Ahimsa paramo dharma”: ahimsa is the highest law. It is, as Gandhi puts it, the very essence of human nature.

“Nonviolence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law—to the strength of the spirit.”

The word nonviolence connotes a negative, almost passive condition, whereas the Sanskrit term ahimsa suggests a dynamic state of mind in which power is released. “Strength,” Gandhi said, “does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.” Therein he found his own strength, and there he exhorted others to look for theirs. Latent in

the depths of human consciousness, this inner strength can be cultivated by the observance of complete ahimsa. Whereas violence checks this energy within, and is ultimately disruptive in its consequences, ahimsa, properly understood, is invincible. “With satya combined with ahimsa, “Gandhi writes, “you can bring the world to your feet.”

When Gandhi speaks of ahimsa as a law, we should take him at his word. Indeed, it was a law for him like gravity; and could be demonstrated in the midst of human affairs. Gandhi even characterized his practice of ahimsa as a science, and said once, “I have been practicing with scientific precision nonviolence and its possibilities for an unbroken period of over 50 years.” He was a precise man, meticulous and exacting, fond of quoting a Marathi hymn that goes, “Give me love, give me peace, O Lord, but don’t deny me common sense.” He valued experience as the test of truth, and the nonviolence he pursued and called “true nonviolence” had to conform to experience in all levels of human affairs. “I have applied it,” he declares, “in every walk of life: domestic, institutional, economic, political. And I know of no single case in which it has failed.” Anything short of this total application did not interest Gandhi, because ahimsa sprang from and worked in the same continuum as his religion, politics, and personal life. Daily practice could determine its value, “when it acts in the midst of and in spite of opposition,” and he advised critics to observe the results of his experiments rather than dissect his theories.

“nonviolence is not a cloistered virtue to be practiced by the individual for his peace and final salvation, but it is a rule of conduct for society. To practice nonviolence in mundane

matters is to know its true value. It is to bring heaven upon earth. I hold it therefore to be wrong to limit the use of nonviolence to cave dwellers [hermits] and for acquiring merit for a favored position in the otherworld. All virtue ceases to have use if it serves no purpose in every walk of life. “

Gandhi’s adherence to nonviolence grew from his experience that it was the only way to resolve the problem of conflict personally. Violence, he felt, only made the pretense of a solution, and sowed seeds of bitterness and enmity that would ultimately disrupt the situation.

One needs to practice ahimsa to understand it. To profess nonviolence with sincerity or even to write a book about it was, for Gandhi, not adequate. “If one does not practice nonviolence in one’s personal relationships with others, one is vastly mistaken. Nonviolence, like charity, must begin at home.” The practice of nonviolence is by no means a simple matter, and Gandhi never intimated that it was. As a discipline, a “code of conduct,” true nonviolence demands endless vigilance over one’s entire way of life because it includes words and thought as well as actions.

“Ahimsa is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt a part of ahimsa. But it is its least expression. The principle of ahimsa is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody. It is also violated by our holding on to what the world needs.”

My Faith in Nonviolence

by Mohandas Gandhi

I have found that life persists in the midst of destruction and, therefore, there must be a higher law than that of destruction. Only under that law would a well ordered society be intelligible and life worth living. And if that is the law of life, we have to work it out in daily life. Wherever there are jars, wherever you are confronted with an opponent, conquer him with love. In a crude manner I have worked it out in my life. That does not mean that all my difficulties are solved. I have found, however, that this law of love has answered as the law of destruction has never done. In India we have had an ocular demonstration of the operation of this law on the widest scale possible. I do not claim therefore that nonviolence has necessarily penetrated the 300 million, but I do claim that it has penetrated deeper than any other message, and in an incredibly short time. We have not been all uniformly nonviolent; and with the vast majority, nonviolence has been a matter of policy. Even so, I want you to find out if the country has not made phenomenal progress under the protecting power of nonviolence.

It takes a fairly strenuous course of training to attain to a mental state of nonviolence. In daily life it has to be a course of discipline though one may not like it, like, for instance, the life of a soldier. But I agree that, unless there is a hearty cooperation of the mind, the mere outward observance will be simply a mask, harmful both to the man himself and to others. The perfect state is reached only when mind and body and speech are in proper coordination. But it is always a case of intense mental struggle. It is not that I am incapable of anger, for instance,

but I succeed on almost all occasions to keep my feelings under control. Whatever may be the result, there is always in me a conscious struggle for following the law of nonviolence deliberately and ceaselessly. Such a struggle leaves one stronger for it. Nonviolence is a weapon of the strong. With the weak it might easily be hypocrisy. Fear and love are contradictory terms. Love is reckless in giving away, oblivious as to what it gets in return. Love wrestles with the world as with the self and ultimately gains mastery over all other feelings. My daily experience, as of those who are working with me, is that every problem lends itself to solution if we are determined to make the law of truth and nonviolence the law of life. For truth and nonviolence are, to me, faces of the same coin.

The law of love will work, just as the law of gravitation will work, whether we accept it or not. Just as a scientist will work wonders out of various applications of the law of nature, even so a man who applies the law of love with scientific precision can work greater wonders. For the force of nonviolence is infinitely more wonderful and subtle than the material forces of nature, like, for instance, electricity. The men who discovered for us the law of love were greater scientists than any of our modern scientists. Only our explorations have not gone far enough and so it is not possible for everyone to see all its workings. Such, at any rate, is the hallucination, if it is one, under which I am laboring. The more I work at this law the more I feel the delight in life, the delight in the scheme of this universe. It gives me a peace and a meaning of the mysteries of nature that I have no power to describe.

Practically speaking there will be probably no greater loss in men than if forcible resistance was offered; there will be no expenditure in armaments and fortifications. The nonviolent training received by the people will add inconceivably to their moral height. Such men and women will have shown personal bravery of a type far superior to that shown in armed warfare. In each case the bravery consists in dying, not in killing. Lastly, there is no such thing as defeat in nonviolent resistance. That such a thing has not happened before is no answer to my speculation. I have drawn no impossible picture. History is replete with instances of individual nonviolence of the type I have mentioned. There is no warrant for saying or thinking that a group of men and women cannot by sufficient training act nonviolently as a group or nation. Indeed the sum total of the experience of mankind is that men somehow or other live on. From which fact I infer that it is the law of love that rules mankind. Had violence, i.e., hate, ruled us, we should have become extinct long ago. And yet the tragedy of it is that the so-called civilized men and nations conduct themselves as if the basis of society was violence. It gives me ineffable joy to make experiments proving that love is the supreme and only law of life. Much evidence to the contrary cannot shake my faith. Even the mixed nonviolence of India has supported it. But if it is not enough to convince an unbeliever, it is enough to incline a friendly critic to view it with favor.

From Nonviolent Resistance, Schocken Books, 1961

A Pause from Violence

by Colman McCarthy

In a memorable, joyous ceremony last week at Crosslands, Pennsylvania, the government of India bestowed its highest civilian honor on Horace Alexander, a 95-year-old British philosopher and peacemaker who was a friend, student, and biographer of Gandhi. Alexander, a Quaker and a conscientious objector in World War I, first involved himself in Indian affairs in 1926, when he spent a week with Gandhi at the Mahatma's ashram in Sabarmati.

His most recent involvement was a 1983 preface to the second edition of "Gandhi Through Western Eyes," Alexander's 1969 classic book in which the Gandhian way—the nonviolent, courageous way—is explained as the world's only rational option for peace.

The Indian government's honoring of Alexander — he received the "Decorated Lotus" award — comes late in this lovely man's long and inspiring life. But the honor breaks into the news when a pause from violence is desperately needed. .

India itself in past weeks has seen a bloody revival of Sikh-Hindu hatred in the Punjab. In the United States, the Reagan administration has sent 400 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to Saudi Arabia. This latest arms shipment ensures that America's role as the world's leading weapons dealer will continue. In 1983, according to the Congressional Research Service, our share of the global arms market rose from 32 percent to 39 percent. The Soviet Union's declined from 26 percent to 16 percent.

Crosslands, Pennsylvania, 30 miles west of Philadelphia, is a Quaker retirement community. Horace Alexander has lived there

for the past six years with his American wife. Except for a slight hearing problem, his health is fine and his wit is sharp. Over the phone the other afternoon he said, "I never expected to live to this age—it's ridiculous!" On such current events as the shipment of missiles to Saudi Arabia, he sighed: "I think we're very good at wasting our money. We must change our whole attitude."

Alexander's memories of Gandhi are sharp. The two men were faithful letter-writers to each other. Their correspondence supplemented Alexander's regular visits to Gandhi from the 1920s to the 1940s. A photograph of the two peacemakers shows them crossing a field together near Gandhi's ashram. Alexander, tall and angular, is wearing a suit and tie and holds with his left hand a pair of bird-watching binoculars looped over his neck. Gandhi, barefoot and dressed in a white loincloth, carries a walking stick.

The two appear to be locked in conversation. It is easy to imagine them doing what only true friends can do for each other: disagreeing with gentleness. Alexander wrote of Gandhi that "to gain his respect it was essential that you should show yourself to be at some point sharply critical of him."

During World War II Alexander traveled to India as a staff member of the Friends (Quaker) Ambulance Unit. In 1943 he visited Gandhi during one of Gandhi's prison fasts. The two shared a high moment in Calcutta on Independence Day in 1947. "I remained in India for some years after Gandhi's death," Alexander recalled, "and at one time considered making my home there. But I concluded that I really belonged in the

West and that my job in old age must be to help. In interpreting India or at least Gandhi's India to Western people."

Few callings could be higher. Or more difficult. Schools in India offer no systematic teaching of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence and organized resistance. Honored, yes; studied, no. It is the same in the United States with Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life was turned around by the reading of Gandhi.

In the epilogue to "Gandhi Through Western Eyes," Alexander describes Gandhi as a varicolored thinker. He was a conservative whose beliefs were "held together by a tradition of family interdependence and of village self-government. "He was a liberal who saw his adversaries not as enemies to be defeated but as possible friends to be persuaded: "I am a born cooperator," Gandhi said repeatedly. He was a radical: "Unless the world accepts nonviolence, it will spell certain suicide for mankind."

Horace Alexander is also a conservative-liberal-radical. At 95, and deservedly honored, he has seen and heard it all. Nothing, though, has come into his mind that has made as much sense as the teaching from his Quaker parents and Gandhi that the peaceable kingdom is eminently possible.

From the Washington Post, June 9, 1984