*Indian Freedom Struggle – Strategies – Gandhi’s Philosophy of Nonviolence (2)*

*Humanities 9 – Social Movements*

**Gandhi's Philosophy of Nonviolence**

Gandhi did not invent nonviolence. However he is called the father of nonviolence. Gandhi helped people to use nonviolent principles. Nonviolence was a strategy used with individuals and also in social and political places. Gandhi described nonviolent actions and ideas as *satyagraha*.

Gandhi disapproved of violence. He identified two forms of violence: passive and physical. The practice of passive violence occurs daily. It is the fuel that ignites the fire of physical violence. Gandhi understands violence from its Sanskrit root, “himsa”, which means injury.

Gandhi teaches that the one who possess nonviolence is blessed. Blessed is the man who can perceive the law of nonviolence in the midst of the raging fire of himsa all around him.

Gandhi objects to violence because it perpetuates hatred. When violence appears to do ‘good’, the good is only temporary and cannot do any good in the future. A true nonviolence activist accepts violence on himself without inflicting it on another. Gandhi says that in the course of fighting for human rights one should accept violence and self-suffering.

For Gandhi, perpetrators of violence (whom he referred to as criminals), are products of social disintegration. Gandhi feels that violence is not a natural tendency of humans. It is a learned experience. There is need for a perfect weapon to combat violence and this is nonviolence.

Gandhi understood nonviolence from its Sanskrit root “ahimsa”. Ahimsa is just translated to mean nonviolence in English, but it implies more than just avoidance of physical harm. Ahimsa implies a total nonviolence, no physical violence, and no passive violence. Gandhi translates Ahimsa as love. Because if you have love towards somebody, and you respect that person, then you are not going to do any harm to that person.

Gandhi’s nonviolence is the search for truth. Truth is the most fundamental aspect in Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence. His whole life has been “experiments of truth”. It was in his pursuit of truth that Gandhi discovered nonviolence. In his autobiography, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments With Truth* he explains, “Ahimsa is the basis of the search for truth. I am realizing that this search is vain, unless it is founded on ahimsa as the basis.”

Truth and nonviolence are as old as the hills. For nonviolence to be strong and effective, it must begin with the mind, without which it will be nonviolence of the weak and cowardly. A coward is a person who lacks courage when facing a dangerous and unpleasant situation and tries to avoid it. A man cannot practice ahimsa and at the same time be a coward. True nonviolence does not include fear. Gandhi feels that possession of arms is not only cowardice but also lack of fearlessness or courage. Gandhi stressed this when he says; “I can imagine a fully armed man to be at heart a coward. Possession of arms implies an element of fear, if not cowardice but true nonviolence is impossibility without the possession of unadulterated fearlessness.” In the face of violence and injustice, Gandhi considers violent resistance preferable to cowardly submission. There is hope that a violent man may someday be nonviolent, but there is no room for a coward to develop fearlessness.

As the world’s pioneer in nonviolence, Gandhi stated that nonviolence can be applied universally. In a letter Gandhi wrote in 1937, he uses these words: “I have no message to give except this that there is no deliverance for any people on this earth or for all the people of this earth except through truth and nonviolence in every walk of life without any exceptions.” In this passage, Gandhi promises “deliverance” through nonviolence for oppressed peoples without exception.

**Satyagraha, the Center of Gandhi’s Contribution to the Philosophy of Nonviolence**

Satyagraha (pronounced sat-YAH-graha) is a compound of two Sanskrit nouns satya, meaning truth (from ‘sat’- being with a suffix ‘ya’), and agraha, meaning, “firm grasping” (a noun made from the agra, which has its root ‘grah’- seize, grasp, with the verbal prefix ‘a’ – ‘to’ ‘towards). Thus Satyagraha literally means devotion to truth. This means to remain firm on the truth and resist untruth actively but nonviolently. Since nonviolence is the only for Gandhi to get to truth, it follows that Satyagraha implies an unwavering search for the truth using nonviolence.

Satyagraha literally means “clinging to truth”. To explain clearly, satyagraha means “truth force,” “soul force,” or “love in action” as explained by Martin Luther King. Satyagraha sometimes means that general principle, the fact that love is stronger than hate.

Satyagraha is a moral weapon and the stress is on soul force over physical force. It aims at winning the enemy through love and patient suffering. It aims at winning over an unjust law, not at crushing, punishing, or taking revenge against the authority, but instead to convert and heal. Though it started as a struggle for political rights, Satyagraha became in the long run a struggle for individual salvation achieved through love and self-sacrifice. Satyagraha is meant to overcome all methods of violence. Gandhi explained in a letter to Lord Hunter that Satyagraha is a movement based entirely upon truth. It replaces every form of violence, direct and indirect, veiled and unveiled and whether in thought, word or deed.

Satyagraha is for the strong in spirit. A doubter or a timid person cannot do it. Satyagraha teaches the art of living well as well as dying. It is love and unshakeable firmness that comes from it. The most important training is mental not physical.

**The Basic Precepts of Satyagraha**

There are three basic precepts essential to Satyagraha: Truth, Nonviolence, and self-suffering.

These three fundamentals correspond to Sanskrit terms:

* Sat/Satya – Truth implying openness, honesty and fairness
* Ahimsa/Nonviolence – refusal to inflict injury upon others.
* Tapasya – willingness to self-sacrifice.

**Satyagraha in Action**

The following are Gandhi’s requirements for a Satyagrahi, or a person who practices satyagraha:

* have faith in God
* believe in truth and nonviolence as a creed
* have faith in the inherent goodness of nature
* truth and love must be expressed through suffering
* live a chaste life
* give up his life and possessions for his/her cause
* be a habitual khaki-wearer and spinner
* be a teetotaler and abstain from other intoxicants
* obey all rules of discipline with a willing heart
* obey jail rules not devised to hurt his/her self-respect

In a nutshell, satyagraha is a movement intended to promote ethical values. Its heart is nonviolence. The satyagrahi also engages in acts of voluntary suffering. Any violence inflicted by the opponent is accepted without retaliation. It is used only after all the other peaceful means have proven ineffective. It seeks to convert, persuade, or win over the opponent.

Source: <http://www.mkgandhi.org/africaneedsgandhi/gandhi's_philosophy_of_nonviolence.htm>