

By Thomas Merton

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GANDHI ON NON-VIOLENCE

SELECTED TEXTS
FROM MOHANDAS K. GANDHI'S
Non-Violence in Peace and War

EDITED,
WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY
THOMAS MERTON

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Merton:

vitality. The Indian mind that was awakening in Gandhi was inclusive not exclusive. It was at once Indian and universal. It was not a mind of hate, of intolerance, of accusation, of rejection, of division. It was a mind of love, of understanding, of infinite capaciousness. Where the extreme nationalisms of Western Fascism and of Japan were symptoms of paranoid fury, exploding into alienation, division, and destruction, the spirit which Gandhi discovered in himself was reaching out to unity, love, and peace. It was a spirit which was, he believed, strong enough to heal every division.

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In Gandhi's mind, non-violence was not simply a political tactic which was supremely useful and efficacious in liberating his people from foreign rule, in order that India might then concentrate on realizing its own national identity. On the contrary, the spirit of non-violence sprang from an inner realization of spiritual unity in himself. The whole Gandhian concept of non-violent action and *satyagraha* is incomprehensible if it is thought to be a means of achieving unity rather than as the fruit of inner unity already achieved.

Indeed this is the explanation for Gandhi's apparent failure (which became evident to him at the end of his own life). He saw that his followers had not reached the inner unity that he had realized in himself, and that their *satyagraha* was to a great extent a pretense, since they believed it to be a means to achieve unity and freedom, while he saw that it must necessarily be the fruit of inner freedom.

Hitler's world was built on the central dogma of the irreversibility of evil. Just as there could be no quarter for the Jews, so the acts that eliminated them were equally irreversible and there could really be no excuse for the Nazis themselves. Even the arguments of an Eichmann, pleading obedience, suggest deep faith in an irreversible order which could not be changed but only obeyed. Such was the finality of Hitler's acts and orders that all the trials of all the Nazis who have been caught, whether they have been executed or liberated or put in prison for short terms, have changed absolutely nothing. It is clear that Hitler was in one thing a brilliant success: everything he did bears the stamp of complete and paranoid finality.

The "fabric" of society is not finished. It is always "in becoming." It is on the loom, and it is made up of constantly changing relationships. Non-violence takes account precisely of this dynamic and non-final state of all relationships among men, for non-violence seeks to change relationships that are evil into others that are good, or at least less bad.

Hence non-violence implies a kind of bravery far different from violence. In the use of force, one simplifies the situation by assuming that the evil to be overcome is clear-cut, definite, and irreversible. Hence there remains but one thing: to eliminate it. Any dialogue with the sinner, any question of the irreversibility of his act, only means faltering and failure. Failure to eliminate evil is itself a defeat. Anything that even remotely risks such defeat is in itself capitulation to evil. The irreversibility of evil then reaches out to contaminate even the tolerant thought of the hesitant crusader who, momentarily, doubts the total evil of the enemy he is about to eliminate.

at all. To punish and destroy the oppressor is merely to initiate a new cycle of violence and oppression. The only real liberation is that which liberates both the oppressor and the oppressed at the same time from the same tyrannical automatism of the violent process, which contains in itself the curse of irreversibility. "The freedom contained in Jesus' teaching of forgiveness is the *freedom from vengeance*, [italics mine] which encloses both doer and sufferer in the relentless automatism of the action process, which by itself need never come to an end." (19)

True freedom is then inseparable from the inner strength which can assume the common burden of evil which weighs both on oneself and one's adversary. False freedom is only a manifestation of the weakness that cannot bear even one's own evil until it is projected onto the other and seen as exclusively his. The highest form of spiritual freedom is, as Gandhi believed, to be sought in the strength of heart which is capable of liberating the oppressed and the oppressor together. But in any event,

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the oppressed must be able to be free within himself, so that he may begin to gain strength to pity his oppressor. Without that capacity for pity, neither of them will be able to recognize the truth of their situation: a common relationship in a common complex of sins.

What is most striking in this concept of Gandhi's is its breadth, its integrity, and its unity. This is his lesson and his legacy to the world: The evils we suffer cannot be eliminated by a violent attack in which one sector of humanity flies at another in destructive fury. Our evils are common and the solution of them can only be common. But we are not ready to undertake this common task because we are not ourselves. Consequently the first duty of every man is to return to his own "right mind" in order that society itself may be sane.

Gandhi on Non-Violence

Non-resistance is restraint voluntarily undertaken for the good of society. It is, therefore, an intensely active, purifying, inward force. . . . It presupposes ability to offer physical resistance. I - 63

Non-violence is the greatest and most active force in the world. One cannot be passively non-violent. . . . One person who can express *ahimsa* in life exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality. I - 113

Non-violence cannot be preached. It has to be practiced. I - 129

[*Human society is naturally non-violent.*] All society is held together by non-violence, even as the earth is held in her position by gravitation. But when the law of gravitation was discovered the discovery yielded results of which our ancestors had no knowledge. Even so when society is deliberately constructed in accordance with the law of non-violence, its structure will be different in material particulars from what it is today. . . . What is happening today is disregard of the law of non-violence and enthronement of violence as if it were an eternal law. I - 198

I know that the progress of non-violence is seemingly a terribly slow progress. But experience has taught me it is the surest way to the common goal. I - 211

My faith in the saying that what is gained by the sword will also be lost by the sword is imperishable. I - 212

Non-violence is impossible without self-purification. I - 245

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My greatest weapon is mute prayer. I - 251

In the composition of the truly brave there should be no malice, no anger, no distrust, no fear of death or physical hurt. Non-violence is certainly not for those who lack these essential qualities. I - 253

Mental violence has no potency and injures only the person whose thoughts are violent. It is otherwise with mental non-violence. It has potency which the world does not yet know. And what I want is non-violence of thought and deed. I - 256

Self-respect and honor cannot be protected by others. They are for each individual himself or herself to guard. I - 260

If we remain non-violent, hatred will die as everything does, from disuse. I - 263

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. I - 266

Democracy can only be saved through non-violence, because democracy, so long as it is sustained by violence, cannot provide for or protect the weak. My notion of democracy is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. This can never happen except through non-violence. . . . Western democracy, as it functions today, is diluted nazism or fascism. I - 269

Non-violent defense presupposes recklessness about one's life and property. I - 271

The immovable force of *satyagraha*—suffering without retaliation. I - 272

Those who die unresistingly are likely to still the fury of violence by their wholly innocent sacrifice. I - 278

He who meets death without striking a blow fulfills his duty cent per cent. The result is in God's hands. I - 284

If intellect plays a large part in the field of violence, I hold that it plays a larger part in the field of non-violence. I - 291

As non-violence admits of no grossness, no fraud, no malice, it must raise the moral tone of the defenders. Hence there will be a corresponding rise in the moral tone of the "weak majority" to be defended. I - 307

Moral support cannot really be given in the sense of giving. It automatically comes to him who is qualified to take it. And such a one can take it in abundance. I - 315

A *satyagrahi* is dead to his body even before his enemy attempts to kill him, i.e., he is free from attachment to his body and only lives in the victory of his soul. Therefore when he is already thus dead, why should

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he yearn to kill anyone? To die in the act of killing is in essence to die defeated. I - 318

The general of a non-violent army has got to have greater presence of mind than that of a violent army, and God would bless him with the necessary resourcefulness to meet new situations as they arise. I - 325

A non-violent army need not have the resourcefulness or understanding of its general, but they will have a perfect sense of discipline to carry out faithfully his orders. I - 326

In this age of democracy it is essential that desired results are achieved by the collective effort of the people. It will no doubt be good to achieve an objective through the effort of an supremely powerful individual, but it can never make the community conscious of its corporate strength. I - 342

If freedom has got to come, it must be obtained by our own internal strength, by our closing our ranks, by unity between all sections of the community. I - 351

A weak man is just by accident. A strong but non-violent man is unjust by accident. I - 354

If liberty and democracy are to be truly saved, they will only be by non-violent resistance no less brave, no less glorious, than violent resistance. And it will be infinitely braver and more glorious because it will give life without making any. I - 357