

Nonviolence as a Spiritual Path: How to Become More Dangerous Dead than Alive

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The nonviolent resister must often express his protest through non-cooperation or boycotts, but he realizes that these are not ends themselves; they are merely means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent. The end is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

When speaking to audiences on the topic of nonviolence, I often am asked: How can anyone who fights using nonviolence ever succeed in bringing about reform when they are challenging a powerful government with ready access to law enforcement and military might? (Notice I use the phrase “fights using nonviolence.” As I point out later in this article, nonviolence is a form of fighting). Why is it that such activists are not killed or jailed by authorities early in their resistance to put an end to their menace? The answer to these questions is that ethical nonviolence activists know how to place themselves in a position where they are more dangerous dead than alive. Through their leadership, they can restrain the vengeful instincts of their followers, appeal to the moral conscience of the people, and in doing so, place themselves in a position where it is to the advantage of their adversary to let them win.

Allow me to give two examples. It was 1964, and the civil rights movement was in full swing. Lyndon Baines Johnson was President of the United States. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., having been influenced by the teachings and success of Mahatma Gandhi in India, was leading a nonviolent movement that was asking for federal legislation to guarantee equal rights for Black Americans. Challenging Lyndon Johnson in the presidential election campaign was the republican candidate, Senator Barry

Goldwater. Senator Goldwater argued that federal civil rights legislation was not necessary, pointing out that we already had an amendment to the US constitution granting the rights of citizenship to black Americans, and that the enforcement of those rights was the responsibility of each individual state. Goldwater's position was one of "states' rights."

Another important player in this socio-political drama was the black leader Malcom X. Malcom X sought equal rights for Black Americans but stated that they should secure their rights by "all necessary means," and that included the use of violence.

So which of these important figures did the democratic incumbent President, Lyndon Johnson choose to support? He couldn't support Barry Goldwater because Senator Goldwater was his political opponent in the presidential race. He couldn't support Malcom X because in doing so he would be condoning violence and possible anarchy in American society. He decided wisely to support Martin Luther King, because King had seized the high moral ground, was appealing to the moral conscience of America, and advocated strict adherence to the principle of nonviolence. The result was the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Rev. King had placed himself in a position where it was advantageous for Lyndon Johnson to support him and thereby let him win.

A second example is found in Mahatma Gandhi's influence over the people of India. After Gandhi's successful nonviolent civil disobedience campaigns in South Africa, the British were well aware of his ability to mobilize the Indian people in ways that crossed religious and cultural boundaries. But in 1922, Gandhi realized that many Indian citizens lacked the discipline and moral restraint to carry out successful nonviolence. The violence committed by marching Indian peasants in Chauri Chaura prompted his fast of February 1922 and his calling a halt to his planned campaign of non-cooperation. In doing so, he demonstrated to the British his almost sagely influence, and his ability to restrain the vengeful and undisciplined revolutionaries poised to launch violent protest against British rule. To execute Gandhi would be to remove the one voice among Indians calling for restraint. The most the British could do was to imprison him. In the end, Gandhi's nonviolent teachings appealed to the moral conscience of the world.

He succeeded in placing himself in a position where it became advantageous to the British to let him win.

Nonviolence as a Spiritual Path

When I link nonviolence with spirituality, the first thought most people bring to mind are moral teachings common to the great world religions such as the golden rule, or Jesus teaching that we should love our neighbor and pray for our enemies, the teachings of nonviolence in Indian philosophy, or the Dalai Lama and his emphasis on cultivating compassion. But this is not what I mean when I speak of nonviolence as a spiritual path. For you haven't experienced the spiritual value of nonviolence until you have received hate mail for speaking out against injustice; you haven't experienced the spiritual value of nonviolence until you have been publicly slandered, or until someone has left you a profane or obscene phone message on your voice mail. Once you have a taste of this kind of hatred, you quickly come to realize what Jesus meant when he said: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for yours is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5: 10).

In many cultures, fire has been used to represent the supreme spirit. In the Hindu tradition, it is the deity Shiva, the bringer of enlightenment and destroyer of ignorance, who is depicted dancing within a ring of fire. In Judaism, it was God who spoke to Moses through a burning bush; and in Christianity, it was the fire of the Holy Spirit that descended on the Apostles at Pentecost. But this fire of the spirit is not a cozy campfire around which people sit to share stories or sing hymns. No, the spiritual fire I am speaking of is the fire of Prometheus. In Greek mythology, it was Prometheus who stole fire from the gods and brought it to earth, an act that led to his eventual demise whereby he was stretched out and chained to a rock with a vulture gnawing at his liver. This Promethean fire is the fire of spiritual enlightenment that unveils truth and, in doing so, Challenges injustice and makes it visible.

Like Prometheus, Jesus is also said to have brought the spiritual fire to humankind, and his fate was not unlike that of Prometheus. But instead of a rock, Jesus was stretched out on a cross; and instead of vulture, it was a sword that impaled his liver. So it is that Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay *History*, referred to Prometheus as the

“Jesus of old mythology.”¹ (O’Day, 1934: 14). It is this Promethean fire that brings enlightenment and exposes social injustice, making a person more influential, and eventually more dangerous, dead than alive. For the influence of such individuals, from Jesus to Gandhi to Martin Luther King, lives on as the sun continues to shine even through the darkest and most violent periods of human history. When you are singed and tempered by this spiritual fire, then you understand why the practice of nonviolence is a spiritual path.

Defining Peace – Defining Violence

Peace Studies is most concisely defined as “conflict resolution through nonviolent means.” Here resolution includes reconciliation, which refers to the restoration of working relationships between conflicting parties. Many professionals in the area of mediation, however, assert that a prerequisite to resolving disputes is to first remove conflict from within the individual. According to Sigmund Freud, many conflicts are actually a projection of inner conflict. We see something in another person we subconsciously dislike about ourselves, and project our self-enmity onto to them. Or to use an analogy attributed to Jesus, we see the speck in our brother’s eye and fail to see the log in our own eye (Matt. 7: 3-5).

In the Christian Gospel of John, Jesus says to his disciples: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you”. This comforting phrase is understood by many to refer to an inner peace, a state of mind free from inner conflict. Certainly in the world in which Jesus was teaching, there was not a lot of peace externally. It was a world filled with great hostility and fear as the Roman Empire ruled with an iron rod. But Jesus left his disciples with the experience of an inner peace that can be experienced independent from the hostility in the external world.

¹ In artistic renditions, the wound in Christ’s side is traditionally placed over the liver as indicated by the descriptive phrase in John’s gospel “. . . there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). The “water” in this passage is believed to refer to bile. It may be significant that the account of Jesus being pierced by the spear only occurs in the Gospel of John. John’s Gospel begins by equating Christ with the powerful Greek concept of Logos. Could it be that the apostle was intentionally evoking the Promethean image so as to appeal to those familiar of Greek philosophy and mythology?

In the Bhagavad-Gita from the Hindu tradition, there is another verse which defines inner peace. In this verse, Lord Krishna says: “He attains peace, into whom all desires flow as waters into the sea, which though ever being filled, is ever motionless, and not he who lusts after desires” (Ch. 2, verse 70). This particular verse defines inner peace as a condition where one is free from desire. Here desire is usually interpreted to mean craving. If you’re in a state of craving, you feel separated from something you need. There is an anxiety there, a lack of fulfillment, a longing for something outside yourself. In that lack of fulfillment, there cannot be complete peace within.

In addition to this inner “personal” peace, at least two further definitions of peace, proposed by peace researcher John Galtung (1985), are explored in the domain of peace studies. First, there is what is called “negative peace.” Negative peace is generally defined as the absence of war or the absence of hostilities. But another way to define peace is in the positive. “Positive peace” is not simply the absence of hostility. Rather, it exists when there is a cooperative relationship present between two parties, whether the parties be two individuals, two social groups, or two nations. As expressed by Barash and Webel (2002: 6), positive peace is “a social condition in which exploitation is minimized or eliminated, and in which there is neither overt violence nor the more subtle phenomenon of underlying *structural violence*.”

Politicians who favor military intervention, often speak of going to war to establish peace. Such politicians are generally thinking in terms of negative peace. In contrast, peace advocates, are people who seek to build cooperative relationships. They generally think in terms of positive peace. In the debate over military action between peace activists and people who favor war, there frequently is misunderstanding because these two factions are unaware their respective positions are based on different definitions of peace. Positive peace is a condition where there exists a sustained and developing cooperative relationship. Two countries, for example, that have established a productive trade relationship are engaged in a type of “peace-building” which is characteristic of positive peace.

To these two definitions of peace I add the concept of “Pro-active peace.” Pro-active peace recognizes that positive peace can occur fortuitously. And if it can happen by chance as the result of a convergence of beneficial circumstances, it can also

deteriorate as those circumstances unexpectedly change. Therefore the practice of proactive peace requires that we 1) actively engage in peace-building to preserve cooperative working relationships, 2) strive to correct social injustice at its inception well before it reaches a crisis point, and 3) anticipate forces on the horizon that threaten to dismantle productive relations between social groups, communities and nations. Efforts to engage citizens in interfaith fellowship and inter-religious dialog, or study circles aimed at improving race relations, are examples of pro-active efforts to develop and sustain positive peace at the community level.

Just as there are different ways of defining peace, there are also different ways of defining violence. When we hear the term violence, most people initially think of physical violence. However, there is also what is called psychological violence. Psychological violence is present when a person is experiencing emotional hostility, intimidation, verbal abuse, or forms of passive aggression. Bullying, which has at times been a serious problem in public schools, is a form of psychological violence. Psychological violence also takes the form of domestic violence between married couples and within families.

Psychological violence can be just as devastating as physical violence. Too often, psychological violence is not quantified well when a nation goes to war. When we hear of the casualties in a particular war, we are given the number of people who have been either killed or physically wounded. The psychological casualties, civilian and military personnel who have not been physically wounded but suffer from psychological trauma, are not so easily diagnosed and quantified. Nor do we hear of the children who witness the killing, or who lose their mother or father as the result of collateral damage. Psychological violence is not adequately recognized, especially in war, and it continues to go under-reported.

A third type of violence is called structural violence. Structural violence occurs when a political, social or economic structure disenfranchises a certain group of people denying them equal opportunity (Galtung, 1985). A political system that does not have laws against child labor tolerates structural violence when businesses and corporations employ underage children. In doing so, children are not able to acquire the education they need for career advancement and a better life. Other examples are countries that restrict

the rights of women, as has been and still is the case to some extent in the United States, or a religious institution that denies women the same opportunities and respect given to men. As further summarized by Barash and Webel:

When people starve to death, or even go hungry, a kind of violence is taking place. Similarly, when humans suffer from diseases that are preventable, when they are denied decent education, affordable housing, opportunities to work, play, raise a family, and freedom of expression and peacefully assembly, a kind of violence is occurring, even if no bullets are shot or clubs wielded... Structural violence is a serious form of social oppression. (2002: 7)

Structural violence is often intentional, but it also can be unintentional. In 2006 when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, it became glaringly apparent that many of the people who could not leave the city were America's working poor. These were individuals who held jobs but were still not able to afford a car so they could evacuate the city. Regardless of the country or political and economic system, structural violence continues to exist, and it is the obligation of all of us to publicly address its inequalities and bring about change.

The History and Philosophy of Nonviolence – A Brief Overview

The discipline of Peace Studies also includes the study of pacifist theory and the history and philosophy of nonviolence. America has a proud history of successful nonviolent activism that goes back to colonial times. In the American Colonies there emerged the "peace churches" which included the Mennonites, the Quakers, the United Brethren and the Moravians. Among the issues addressed by the peace churches were witchcraft, the treatment of Indians and the institution of slavery.

The first major issue to present itself in colonial times was known as the "Antimonium Controversy." There was a small group of Puritans who gave birth to the "dangerous" idea that in matters of the spirit, following one's inner light should supersede or overrule theological law and church doctrine. Anne Hutchinson, Mary Dyer, John Cotton and Roger Williams were among those who propagated this teaching. For their beliefs they were banished from the Massachusetts Bay colony. In defiance, these individuals would return several times to Massachusetts to promote their teaching, only

to be persecuted and tortured. Ann Hutchison was banished from the colony of Massachusetts and founded the town of Portsmouth, which along with the towns of Providence (founded by Roger Williams), and Newport, became the colony of Rhode Island. Mary Dyer was eventually hanged, and is immortalized by a statue in her honor which stands outside the Boston State House. (Jezer, Cooney, and Michalowski, 1987:15-17).

This teaching of the supremacy of one's inner light became the central tenet of Quakerism and in time evolved into the issue of "freedom of conscience." The Society of Friends (Quakers), which was established by George Fox and Margaret Fell, left England to flee persecution and were given refuge in Rhode Island. Soon after Quaker leader William Penn founded the colony of Pennsylvania, Penn declared what is known as "The Great Law" which guaranteed freedom of conscience to its citizens. Eventually the concept of freedom of conscience, at least in the domain of religious beliefs, was given mandate in the first amendment of the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution.

The concept of freedom of conscience soon influenced the debate during the American Revolution over how to define crimes of treason. It also became the battle cry of conscientious objectors who refused to bare arms. When addressing students, I often ask the question: "We have an amendment which guarantees American citizens the right to bare arms; perhaps we should also have an amendment guaranteeing Americans the right *not* to bare arms?"²

In the early 1800's, two major secular organizations emerged in the United States, these being the *New England Non-resistance Society* which appealed to the educated elite, and the *League of Universal Brotherhood* whose membership consisted mostly of

² To be a conscientious objector, it has been a requirement of the US Selective Service Agency that a person be opposed to all war. This stipulation, however, does not honor the true meaning of *Freedom of Conscience*. Wars can have very different issues, political circumstances and military goals. The US role in the Vietnam War was very different that in WWI, and the circumstances leading up to the Second Gulf War in Iraq, e.g., the unsubstantiated claim that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, were very different from the first Gulf War launched in response to Iraq's unlawful invasion of Kuwait. For this reason, one can in good conscience adopt a position of relative pacifism, where a person is opposed to one war, yet be in favor of another. The principle of *Freedom of Conscience* therefore, should permit a person to selectively refrain from participating in any given war without forcing a person to adhere to the absolute philosophical position of being opposed to all war. For this reason, an amendment to the US constitution guaranteeing a person the right not to bare arms may be necessary.

working class citizens. The dominant issue during this antebellum period was the abolition of slavery, but the women's rights movement also was gathering momentum. This was due primarily to the leadership provided by Quaker women, for it was only in Quaker meetings that women were permitted to speak. After the civil war, it was the Quaker women who became leaders in the Women's Rights Movement and the struggle for Women's suffrage.

The most noted contributor to theories of nonviolence prior to the Civil War was Henry David Thoreau, renowned for his *Essay on the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. But the influence on Adin Ballou, and Unitarian minister, cannot be overlooked. Ballou promoted what he called "principled pacifism" and authored a book entitled *Christian Nonviolence*. There is evidence that Ballou as well as Henry Thoreau influenced the person who contributed most to nonviolent theory, this being Mahatma Gandhi.

Recognized first for his nonviolent successes in South Africa and India, Gandhi was a prolific writer who left a legacy of thoughtful commentary on the philosophy of non-cooperation and nonviolent resistance. His teaching on nonviolence can best be summarized as having four central components, the first of which is 'ahimsa, which means nonviolence, not killing or causing physical pain. Expressed in the positive, it implies reverence for life and acting toward one another with compassion and understanding while maintaining standards of discipline.

The second component is "satyagraha." Often translated "Soul Force," it is also interpreted to mean "truthful effort." Satyagraha constitutes sacrificial action, selfless service and a willingness to suffer for a just cause by making oneself a sacrificial victim of an injustice to call public attention to the injustice without striking back or seeking vengeance. Proactively, satyagraha initiates struggle and seeks to keep opponents off-balance by doing the unexpected. When Rosa Parks sat in the front of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, refusing to give up her seat, she was publicly arrested and taken to jail. In doing so, Rosa Parks performed an act a satyagraha.

The third component of Gandhian philosophy is "tapasya." Tapasya means austerity, or discipline whereby one conserves or restrains anger. Unfortunately, tapasya is often misunderstood as being a condition of anger repression. It is, rather, the practice of observing one's anger internally so the energy generating the anger can be transformed

and re-channeled in a positive direction. One's energy is then directed not toward individuals but towards issues and unjust systems. During the practice of tapasya, one is temporarily non-responsive until an epiphany occurs, which is an insight or realization that reveals to a person an effective positive nonviolent response.

The final component central to Gandhi's philosophy is "swaraj," usually translated to mean home rule. Swaraj also implies self-sufficiency and self-reliance and refers to not being economically dependent on another person or country so truthful effort or satyagraha can be pursued without fear of economic loss or reprisal. Swaraj, therefore, can be applied on a national, community, or individual level.

In the context of foreign policy, the principle of swaraj is often misunderstood to mean isolationism. But self-sufficiency and self-reliance is not isolationism. Rather, it means obtaining and maintaining for oneself a significant degree of economic independence. This does not mean a nation cannot engage in productive trade relations. Trade, especially in an age of increasing globalization, is a powerful tool for building positive peace between countries and developing valued cooperative working relationships with other nations. What is to be avoided is economic dependence on a particular good such that a nation becomes vulnerable should that product or resource suddenly be disrupted or denied. Economic dependence places a country in a condition where a denial of the traded product could be used as a weapon, and the dependent country feels pressured to go to war to keep the valued product accessible. Adhering to the principle of swaraj prevents such vulnerability from weakening a country's international status.

As an example, the United States and Europe, have placed themselves in a dependent and vulnerable position with their reliance on foreign oil. President George W. Bush, in his 2007 *State of the Union Address*, even went so far as to say the US is "addicted to oil." This over-dependence on foreign energy is a violation of the principle of swaraj which has continued to threaten the economic stability of Western nations.

It must be made clear that Mahatma Gandhi rejected the phrase "passive resistance." (Rolland, 1924: 52,53). In Gandhi's view nonviolence applied in the pursuit of social justice is not passive, nor it is submissive or complacent. It involves "direct action," and is in essence, a form of fighting. One chooses an issue that the public will

perceive as beyond compromise. Advocates then perform acts of satyagraha, intentionally allowing themselves to become public victims of the injustice while seizing the “high moral ground,” refusing to engage in unethical and violent behavior. Through such activism, they create a groundswell of public support setting in motion political mechanisms that bring about reform.

While there are many people who laud the principle of nonviolence, the popular view holds that nonviolence cannot succeed if one of the parties involved in the conflict chooses to use violence. This assertion is incorrect and reflects an all too common misconception.

Martin Luther King and his followers during civil rights movement advocated strict adherence to nonviolence. Yet they were often seized upon by police with dogs and fire hoses. The “Freedom Riders” who intentionally violated the segregation laws at bus terminals had their busses bombed and burned. Many black citizens were subject to lynching by the Ku Klux Klan, and several white activists were killed in drive-by shootings. Rosa Parks and others were jailed and King had his house fire-bombed. In the Women’s suffrage movement, Alice Paul and other suffragists were arrested, persecuted and imprisoned in their efforts to secure the passage of the suffrage amendment. And the British didn’t play by nonviolent rules either, particularly when General Reginald Dyer massacred over 400 innocent Indian civilians while wounding 1200 at Amritsar (Wolpert: 2001). Yet all three of these nonviolent movements succeeded in exposing social injustice so as to provoke reforms necessary to achieve their goals with far less loss of life and financial cost than would have resulted from a violent revolution.

Are democracy and a free press necessary for nonviolence to be successful? Freedoms guaranteed in the first amendment of the United States Constitution are priceless, but successful nonviolent movements, such as the Dutch Resistance Movement during which the people of the Netherlands used non-cooperation to thwart the Nazi round of Jews, show that nonviolence can work, even when confronted with dictatorial regimes.

Is nonviolence always successful? No, but neither is violence or military action always successful. Violence may succeed in forcing reform, but it rarely results in reconciliation and often sows the seeds for future violent conflict.

The purpose of nonviolent activism then, from the Gandhian perspective, is to make injustice visible. It is the goal of peace activists to bring injustice to public attention before a crisis point is reached where injustice erupts into violence. The process requires that one seize the high moral ground, adhering to the highest ethical standards. Through the practice of conserving one's anger (*tapasya*), a person abstains from violent retaliation, be it physical, psychological, or structural.

As mentioned earlier, the United States has a proud history of successful nonviolent movements. It was through the power of nonviolence that the women's rights movement, which began in the early 1800's, won for American women the right to own property, attend college, inherit wealth, gain custody of their children in cases of divorce, and ultimately, in 1921, the right vote. It was through the power of nonviolence that the labor movement in the early 20th century won the 40 hour work week, the right to overtime pay, and laws preventing child labor. It was through the power of nonviolence that migrant workers in California led by Caesar Chavez won higher wages, better working conditions and the right to unionize. (Jezer, Cooney, and Michalowski, 1987: 176-181). It was through the power of nonviolence that the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 years of age, and black Americans led by Martin Luther King, Jr., finally received federal government support for the freedoms they were promised nearly 100 years earlier in the 14th and 15th Amendments to the US constitution. Outside the US, it was through the power of nonviolence that apartheid fell in South Africa, and the Solidarity movement led by Lech Walesa succeeded in Poland. But in addition to these nonviolent success stories, there have also been some unfortunate failures of nonviolence.

Since Colonial times in the US, abolitionists worked tirelessly using non-cooperation and other nonviolent strategies to bring an end to the institution of slavery. Protests against slavery in the United States began as early as 1688 (Ruchames, 1969: 36). In the early 1800's prominent statesmen in the US, including John Quincy Adams, Daniel Raymond, and the former President of the United States, James Madison, wrote letters and articles condemning this evil institution, discussing strategies, to wean the southern states of their economic dependence on slavery (Ruchames, 1969: 263-288). But the slaveholding states and politicians held too much influence. The moral, political and economic will was simply not present to alter the course of history. The result was a

disastrous mid-century US civil war and racial prejudice which continues with us even today.

In 1933, Rabbi Steven Wise and a Unitarian minister named Rev. John Hayes Holmes, organized a march in New York City protesting the US State Department's immigration standards that were preventing larger numbers of European Jews from entering the country to escape Nazi persecution. They would soon be joined by Roman Catholic activist Dorothy Day, and together they petitioned President Roosevelt and the US State Department to change the US immigration standards. That was seven years before World War II and the Nazi death camps. But the moral and political will was not there to alter the course of history.

In 1963, a dedicated activist named A.J. Muste, who was a former Dutch Reform minister, gave a speech in San Francisco stating that the developing conflict in Vietnam would be a war the US could not win. But the moral and political will was not there to alter the course of history. The result was the long drawn out Vietnam War in which over 55,000 American soldiers lost their lives and well over 500,000 Vietnamese soldiers died.

The above three examples attest to the horrendously tragic wars that can occur when nonviolent leaders and their social movements are ignored for the sake of maintaining civil obedience. Thus we should listen to our nonviolent activists, for they are the prophets of their time. They are the leaders who bring the Promethean fire to earth to expose injustice, but too often it is an injustice we do not want to see.

Conclusion

What we can learn from this remarkable history is that people, well-organized and committed to nonviolence can make a huge difference in the fight against injustice. I further assert that the truth which exposes injustice and makes it visible to the world is not something we should simply believe in, rather it is something we should experience and give witness to; that the spirit which energizes reform movements is not something we should simply believe in, it is something we should experience and allow to propel us into action; that the rock of Prometheus or the cross of Christ on which we must sacrifice ourselves is not something we should simply believe in, it is something we should experience through our own selfless commitment to human rights and human dignity.

And your experience will have absolutely nothing to do with your religious affiliation. It doesn't matter whether you are Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'I, Native American, atheist or agnostic. What matters is that you expose injustice at great risk to your personal reputation and well-being, that you experience the hate in the world first-hand, and after facing it directly, rise above it and choose its opposite.

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