

# Nonviolent Communication: Gandhian Principles for Everyday Living<sup>1</sup>

by Miki Kashtan

One of the most frequent questions I hear when I speak about Nonviolent Communication is “Why Nonviolent?” People often hear the word nonviolent as a combination of two words, as a negation of violence. Since they don’t think of themselves as ‘violent,’ the concept of ‘non-violence’ doesn’t make intuitive sense, and appears foreign to them.

For some time, I felt similarly. I was happier when I heard people talk about Compassionate Communication instead of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) because it felt more positive. After all, the practice of NVC itself is about focusing on what we want and where we are going instead of looking at what’s not working. So why would the name not reflect this focus?

Like others, I was unaware of the long-standing tradition of nonviolence to which the practice of Nonviolent Communication traces its origins. Then I learned more about Gandhi’s work and the Civil Rights movement. That is when I fell in love with the name Marshall Rosenberg gave to this practice. That love has deepened over the years. Now I want to bring out the continuity so as to situate NVC within the tradition of nonviolence. I do this by exploring seven core principles of Gandhian nonviolence that are also reflected in the practice of NVC.

## 1. Nonviolence as Love

The word nonviolence is the closest literal translation that Gandhi found to the Sanskrit word *ahimsa*. In Sanskrit, negation is sometimes used to suggest that a concept or quality is too great to be named directly. “Ahimsa is unconditional love,” writes Eknath Easwaran, in his preface to *Gandhi the Man*. “The word we translate as ‘nonviolence’ is . . . central in Buddhism as well: Ahimsa, the complete absence of violence in word and even thought as well as action. This sounds negative, just as ‘nonviolence’ sounds passive. But like the English word ‘flawless,’ ahimsa denotes perfection.” As another example, *avera*, which means “love” in Sanskrit, literally translates into “non-hatred.”

Hinduism is not the only tradition that honors the unnamable. Judaism has a similar practice. The name of God is unsayable in Hebrew, being letters without vowels, without instructions for how to read them. Some things are beyond words. Nonviolence is one of them.

Gandhi also used other terms for his practice. One word that he commonly used is *Satyagraha*, which translates as “truth force.” At times he also used the term “soul force.” Whichever term he used, Gandhi made it abundantly clear that nonviolence is a positive force, not a negation.

“Satyagraha means ‘holding to the truth in every situation’. This is ahimsa, which is more than just the absence of violence; it is intense love.” (*Gandhi the Man*, p. 53)

---

<sup>1</sup> I want to acknowledge Francisco “Pancho” Ramos-Stierle and Alix Johnson for doing extensive research for stories and quotes from Gandhi’s life and writings, Kit Miller for planting the seed of this article in a conversation in 2006, and Michael Nagler for reading this article from a Gandhian scholar’s perspective and offering invaluable suggestions.

“A *Satyagrahi* has infinite patience, abundant faith in others, ample hope.” (*Young India*, Mar 19<sup>th</sup>, 1931)

Why is nonviolence equated with love? Clearly, it’s different from forms of love that sometimes have been the impetus for great violence. (Think of Othello as one such example.) What is this kind of love?

It appears to me that Jesus, Gandhi, Marshall Rosenberg, and those of us following their tradition through the practice of NVC, think of love as the full radical acceptance of the humanity of every person, regardless of how unhappy we are with their actions.

Indeed, Gandhi said: “It is nonviolence only when we love those that hate us.” (*Gandhi the Man*, p. 108) These words are strikingly similar to a core principle of Jesus’ teachings: “Love thy enemy.” (Matthew 5:44) Both of them speak to the vision of a heart that is fully open to everyone, especially our enemies. Marshall Rosenberg, too, has said that the practice of NVC emerged from his attempt to understand love.

I understand this love as the commitment to act in ways that uphold everyone’s humanity. It means caring for the wellbeing of the other person even when we are in opposing positions; even when all that we value is at stake. This is one essence of what nonviolence means.

Everything else follows from this principle. I am reminded of a Talmudic story about a man who came to Hillel, one of the famous rabbis, and asked Hillel to teach him the Torah standing on one foot. Hillel is reputed to have said: “Love thy neighbor as thyself, and the rest is commentary.” Similarly both Gandhian nonviolence and the practice of NVC are, in some ways, elaborations on this one key principle: whatever the circumstances, no matter what else is going on, we are committed to caring for the wellbeing of all.

The practice of NVC gives specific form to this commitment. We apply our hearts, focus our consciousness, and bring active attention to transcending and transforming fear and judgment. We excavate underneath our habits to understand our needs, so we can know what longings, dreams, and values inform our reaction to another. This allows us to reach for and maintain an open heart to the needs of another. When we hear others with full empathic presence, their core, irreducible humanity shines forth. I think of this quality of practical open-heartedness, of caring for the wellbeing of someone regardless of her or his actions, as an essential ingredient of the love I want to live in the world.

## **2. The Courage to Face Consequences**

The history of nonviolence is replete with examples of people willing to endure extreme consequences to live in line with their values. The Gandhian tradition, in particular, includes the willingness to face death in order to achieve the intention and experience of pure nonviolence.

“Just as one must learn the art of killing in the training for violence, so one must learn the art of dying in the training for non-violence. Violence does not mean emancipation from fear, but discovering the means of combating the cause of fear. Non-violence, on the other hand, has no cause for fear... He who has not overcome all fear cannot practice ahimsa.” (*All Men Are Brothers*, p. 104)

“I must obey, even at the cost of my life, the law of love.” (*Golden Treasury of Wisdom*, p. 34)

“He/she should not do that which he/she knows to be wrong, and suffer the consequence whatever it may be, this is the key to the use of soul-force.” (*Hind Swaraj*, p. 69).

When we look deeper, we see that it is our internal response to the consequences, namely our fear, which stops us from acting on our full truth at all times. I doubt that Gandhi meant to imply that one would have to *feel* no fear. I rather believe the focus is on the willingness to *overcome* the fear. What fuels courage, if we read Gandhi’s quotes carefully, is the conviction of truth and integrity, coupled with the abiding trust in love’s power. The intensity of love and commitment serves as a form of fire that burns through the perceived danger. This love is not dependent on the behavior of other people. This love continues even in the extreme of enduring violence against self.

Fear itself doesn’t go away as the practice of nonviolence deepens. What changes is the ability to bear it and still choose love and courage. With enough practice and commitment, acting based on fear becomes less and less of a draw.

Indeed, Gandhi, who ceaselessly attempted to live the principles of his teaching, time and again walked directly into potential harm’s way to carry out his plans. During the civil war that broke out towards the end of the independence campaign between Hindus and Muslims, for example, Gandhi (in his 70s) walked through the most dangerous and violent zones (Bihar state and Noakhali) to “live the truth he went to teach” (*Gandhi the Man*, p. 90).

“It is not at all impossible that we may have to endure every hardship that we can imagine, and wisdom lies in pledging ourselves on the understanding that we shall have to suffer all that and worse.” (*Gandhi the Man*, p. 99)

The practice of NVC applies the principles of nonviolence primarily to relationships and to dialogue. Most people who practice NVC rarely apply it in circumstances where danger to life may be present, although increasing numbers do so successfully. Whether or not physical danger is present, practicing NVC invites us to profound emotional vulnerability. It is our emotional self that might be “injured” or “die” as we open ourselves to truth and love in our interactions with ourselves and other humans.

For many, these interactions become a stimulus for intense fear that is *experienced* as a threat to survival. For example, in the context of everyday living, when someone judges us harshly, the threat to our physical survival is highly unlikely. And yet we often rally to defend ourselves as if our survival were at stake. It takes a great deal of practice to remain open and calm and even loving and curious in the face of criticism, blame, or judgment. This practice is what prepares us for the kind of uncompromising love that nonviolence expresses.

At the same time, the practice of opening up to whatever comes our way has an unexpected benefit. As we engage with it, we learn that in fact our emotional self is *not* in any danger. Our soul, our human essence, the truth of who we are, are regularly strengthened by stretching into this vulnerability.

### **3. Seeing Others' Humanity**

One translation of the word *ahimsa* refers to it as “the state of the heart which has no enemies.” And, indeed, Gandhi worked tirelessly to maintain respectful, open, trusting relationships with everyone, regardless of how much he opposed the position, policies, and actions of whoever he was in struggle with. He was uncompromising in this commitment. Here’s the way one of his students described the regard Gandhi always held for his opponents: “It was not forgiveness, but whole-hearted acceptance by him of their standpoint as *their* truth which for the time being held the same place in their growth as his truth in his own, and thus entitled to equal respect.” (*In Gandhiji's Mirror*, p. 10)

As an extreme example, both of Gandhi's letters to Hitler were addressed to ‘my friend.’ In the second one, Gandhi starts by saying:

“Dear Friend, that I address you as a friend is no formality. I own no foes. My business in life has been for the past 33 years to enlist the friendship of the whole of humanity by befriending mankind irrespective of race, colour or creed.” (Letter in Mani Bhavan Museum, Mumbai)

Gandhi took explicit pleasure in maintaining this stance towards and with others:

“It is to me a matter of perennial satisfaction that I retain generally the affection and trust of those whose principles and policies I oppose. In spite of my denunciation of British policy, I enjoy the affection of thousands of Englishmen. It is a triumph of non-violence.” (*Everyman's*, June 19 – The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi)

Respectful consideration of opponents, an honoring of their humanity and their value, is a key element of nonviolence, not an accidental by-product. Gandhi expressed this value early on, and included it in his vision of society. Here’s just one example:

“Let us honour our opponents for the same honesty of purpose and patriotic motives that we claim for ourselves.” (*Everyman's*, July 10 – Selections from Gandhi)

The practice of NVC follows in Gandhi's footsteps and provides practical steps for *cultivating* this capacity to see the humanity of each person. The practice is grounded in understanding everyone and every action, belief, and choice in terms of fundamental, core, human needs that are shared by everyone. No matter what action someone takes, there is a human need at the heart of the choice - a dream, a vision, which could be universally understood and usually shared.

The practice of NVC takes a step beyond distinguishing between the action and the person. To see the full humanity of others, we also distinguish between the action and the shared human needs underlying the action. To return to the extreme example, even Hitler had a vision he was working towards and which he articulated. What could be his needs? I imagine something along the lines of the purity, elegance, and clarity that come from being with people similar to us. This image can strike a chord in many if not most of us. I can easily see, and often experience, being only with people similar to us as one strategy for the human needs to belong, to have ease in relating, and to

have a sense of meaning and connection. Seeing this, I can resonate with Hitler's underlying needs, and thus make *human* sense of Hitler despite of and independently of his actions.<sup>2</sup>

No matter how abhorrent others' actions can be for us, Gandhi urged us to see and connect with their fundamental humanity. In the NVC practice, we do this by reaching for and connecting with the underlying needs. One of the core practices that serious NVC practitioners employ on a regular basis is what is known as *Transforming Enemy Images*. I offer an example of this practice here to support those who want a deeper understanding of what studying NVC may entail.

### **Practice: Transforming Judgments and Enemy Images**

#### **KEYS:**

- a. Judging someone is an indication that a need of ours is not met. The first step in transforming judgments is to recognize and connect with our unmet needs.
  - b. The action we're judging is itself an attempt to meet needs. The second step is connecting with the needs of the person we're judging so we can open our hearts with compassion.
  - c. When we experience challenge in transforming our judgments, we can reflect on what needs we might be trying to meet by holding on to our judgments. Connecting with this set of needs may be essential to enable the previous two steps to proceed.
- 
1. Write down a judgment you have of someone else that you would like to explore. This may be something you think about that person that you completely believe is true. You may pick someone in your personal life, or someone who is in some position of political or economic power whose actions affect you.
  2. Think of a time or situation when you are likely to have this judgment come up, and write an observation of what this person is actually saying or doing at that time.
  3. What needs of yours are not met in relation to that person's action? How do you feel when these needs are not met? Explore this sufficiently to experience the relief of self-connection.
  4. Explore the possibility of opening your heart to this other person. What needs do you imagine this person might be trying to meet by taking this action? How might this person be feeling? Explore this sufficiently to experience the relief of compassion.
  5. Check in with yourself about your original judgment. Is it still alive? If yes, return to connecting with your own needs or with the other person's needs – wherever you're experiencing a "charge." If the judgment is still alive after that, consider: What needs might

---

<sup>2</sup> The issue of why acting on these needs would take the form of such unimaginable actions is beyond the scope of this article. I believe anyone interested in exploring further the roots of violence could benefit enormously from James Gilligan's book *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and Its Causes*. Gilligan discusses, in particular, the role of shame in leading to violence and cruelty.

you be trying to meet by holding on to this judgment? What feelings arise in relation to this? Again, connect with yourself sufficiently about these needs to experience some relief.

6. Check in with yourself again about the judgment. If it's still alive, consider the following set of questions:
  - a. Is there any way in which you believe the judgment to be "the truth"? If so, explore what needs might be met by this belief, and what needs might be met by letting go of this belief.
  - b. Are you afraid to express this judgment? If yes, what needs are you afraid would not be met by sharing it, and what needs might be met?
  - c. Are you judging yourself for having this judgment? If yes, explore any way in which you're telling yourself that you should not have this judgment. Connect with your choice about whether or not to work any further on transforming this judgment, and explore any needs that might be met by continuing to work on transforming the judgment, or letting go of working on it.
  - d. Reflect on your feelings, needs, and any requests you have of yourself or of the other person in this moment.

#### **4. Appealing to Others' Humanity**

When we see others as evil, unable to care, or in some fundamental way immune to transformation, then the only available strategy is to overpower and vanquish them. Embracing the Gandhian approach and upholding the humanity of our "enemies" lead to other strategies to create change. When opponents, even oppressors, are seen as humans possessing care, dignity, and a heart that can be reached, then speaking to their humanity becomes a logical and direct approach to transforming the situation. In Gandhi's own words:

"Nonviolence in us ought to soften our opponent, it ought to strike a responsive chord in his heart." (*Everyman's*, August 20 – Harijan: May 13, 1939)

Gandhi's life and work provide some astonishing examples to illustrate this radical concept. Gandhi's great first "experiment with truth" was designed to recover the dignity of the Indian community of South Africa. His chief "enemy" at the time was General Jan Christian Smuts, head of the South African Government in the Transvaal. Here's an account of an early confrontation with Smuts:

“Gandhi goes to the head of the Transvaal government General Smuts and says: ‘I’ve come to tell you that I am going to fight against your government’. Smuts responds: ‘Anything more?’ Gandhi: ‘I am going to win’. Smuts, laughing: ‘How?’ Gandhi: ‘With your help.’ (*Gandhi the Man*, p. 47)

Smuts’ secretary provides a rare testimonial about what it feels like to be offered *Satyagraha* by committed, well-trained activists:

“I don’t like your people, and do not care to assist them at all. But what am I to do? You help us in our days of need. How can we lay hands upon you? I often wish that you took to violence like the English strikers, and then we would know at once how to dispose of you. But you will not injure even the enemy. You desire victory by self-suffering alone... and that is what reduces us to sheer helplessness”. (*Search for a Nonviolent Future*, p. 64)

As a result of years of such encounters, Jan Christian Smuts himself experienced a complete transformation. As Gandhi said:

“In a non-violent conflict there is no rancour left behind, and in the end the enemies are converted into friends. That was my experience in South Africa with General Smuts. He started with being my bitterest opponent. Today he is my warmest friend” (*Everyman’s*, May 16 - The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi)

Smuts also attested to this shift. Eventually he came to believe that he was “not worthy to stand in the shoes of so great a man” as Gandhi. (*Mahatma Gandhi: essays and reflections on his life and work*, p. 226)

A particularly striking example of Gandhi’s commitment to seeing everyone’s humanity took place in the late 1930s. Gandhi was at a meeting to pressure the local Maharaja to democratize in Rajkot. Thugs came and started beating up the participants. After a short while, Gandhi, who was trembling with revulsion and determination, told all his followers to go home and leave him alone with the thugs. The thugs were completely won over and offered to escort him back to the ashram. (*Incidents in Gandhi’s Life*, pp. 99-101)

British historian Arnold Toynbee summarized the effect of years of *satyagraha*: “Gandhi made it impossible for us to continue ruling India, but at the same time, he made it possible for us to abdicate without rancour and without dishonour”. (*Search for a Nonviolent Future*. p. 189)

Similarly, the history of nonviolent movements in the United States contains many moving stories of demonstrators creating powerful human connection with police officers and changing the dynamics of tense moments as a result. Here’s one example:

We went to the Nevada Test Site in 1982 to draw attention to underground nuclear testing. During the season of Lent, we were there daily, standing along the road as the workers drove by us in buses and cars. Each day we spoke to the sheriffs from Nye County and the Wakenhutt Security officers who were there because we were there. Any idea of "them" and "us" broke down over those days of human connection. At the end of the 40 days of witness, 19 of us committed civil disobedience--walking past the boundaries created for us. Jim Merlino, the head sheriff, instructed his officers as they were arresting us to "treat us like we

were his children." Each year we went back during Lent and at other times too. We became friends with several of the officers. We greeted each other with hugs and asked about each other's lives. We always talked to them about what we were doing and why we were there too, and respectfully agreed to disagree. When Terry and I got married in 1986, we invited Jim Merlino to the wedding. He was not able to attend but sent us a gift. He has long since retired, but I still am occasionally in touch with him. To this day, our organization--Nevada Desert Experience--has an exceptional relationship with the security forces at the Nevada Test Site.

– Anne Symens-Bucher, NDE co-founder.

Moving from the arena of social change to the challenges of everyday living, the practice of NVC calls on us to remember, even in the midst of intense conflict, that others are more like us than we imagine some of the time. For example, when someone says “no” to a request of ours, we can transcend the habit of believing this means they don’t care about us. Nonviolence becomes challenging precisely when people don’t do what we want. In those moments we can extend care to others through recognizing and appreciating the needs that wouldn’t be met for them if they did what we want. If there’s any way that another person will come to *want* to give us what we ask for, it is much more likely to happen through providing the relief of acceptance and care to them, which softens the heart and can create possibilities where none seemed available. Instead of forcing our way or giving up, the practice of NVC entails dialogue that connects with both parties’ needs and generates mutual goodwill.

## **5. Solutions that Work for Everyone**

One of Gandhi’s core methods was noncooperation. Although noncooperation may appear on the surface as adversarial, Gandhi always maintained that “my noncooperation has its roots not in hatred but in love.” (*Gandhi the Man*, p. 56). He was deeply rooted in the Hindu tradition which holds that all people are one. How did he resolve the apparent contradiction? Even though the British were resisting his efforts, he never wavered in his conviction that what the British were doing in India was not to their benefit.

“We will not submit to this injustice – not merely because it is destroying us but because it is destroying you as well.” (*Gandhi the Man*, p. 74)

Gandhi maintained that both the goal of his campaigns as well as the method of working towards them were to contribute to everyone’s benefit.

“Satyagraha is an all-sided sword... it blesses him who uses it and him against whom it is used.” (*Hind Swaraj*, p. 74).

“I do not seek to harm [the British]. I want to serve them even as I want to serve my own. I believe that I have always served them. I served them up to 1919 blindly. But when my eyes were opened and I conceived non-cooperation, the object still was to serve them.” (*Young India*, Dec 3rd, 1930.)

Gandhi especially insisted that the terms of eventual agreement would need to consider the position of others, so that they are livable. Indeed, when the terms of surrender are too restrictive (such as in the case of the WWI Versailles agreements), the level of resentment and powerlessness experienced

by the losing side are likely to erupt later. (Hitler's rise has been in part explained by this national experience of humiliation.)

“A Satyagrahi never yields to panic or hesitancy, neither does she/he think of humiliating the other party, or reducing it to an abject surrender. She/he may not swerve from the path of justice and may not dictate impossible terms. She/he may not pitch them too low.” (*Young India*, Mar 19<sup>th</sup>, 1931)

Embracing the dialogue practice of NVC means that in every situation we consider the needs and well-being of others, even in times of conflict, and strive to reach solutions that maintain everyone's dignity. Even when wanting something with great passion, the deep practice of NVC entails an active unwillingness to accept a solution that would be at the expense of others.

What happens when dialogue breaks down? What do we do when the stakes are high and we are facing active or potential harm? Can dialogue always be used, or are there times when force is absolutely necessary in order to protect life?

### ***Protective Use of Force***

As part of his explorations that led to the creation of the practice of NVC, Marshall Rosenberg set out to investigate such extreme situations, and to consider under which conditions the use of force is consistent with a nonviolent stance. My understanding of these conditions is as follows:

- a. **When the risk of harm, mostly of a physical kind, is imminent.** It takes great discipline when we are worried about potential harm to remain calm enough to discern when the risk is truly imminent or unavoidable if not attended to immediately, and when dialogue remains an option to continue to explore. Some classic examples include a child running into the street; a company about to begin logging in an endangered area; a person with repeating episodes of violent behavior.
- b. **When all options for dialogue have been exhausted.** This condition is quite exacting. It's only about the other party's willingness to engage in dialogue. Even when danger is imminent, if dialogue is still an option, we would prefer to approach the other party through connection rather than through force. Maintaining our commitment to nonviolence means a readiness to show up for dialogue for as long as the other party is willing. (Exploring how to address those moments in which we are beyond our own capacity and resources is beyond the scope of this article.)
- c. **When the intention of any forceful action is to protect from harm.** It takes a deep spiritual practice to attain a state in which we can exercise force and remain entirely connected to another's humanity, so that there is no ounce of subtle punitive energy behind the action. At times the clarity of focus on protecting rather than punishing may result in different forms of force being used, or more minimal force, only what's absolutely necessary to protect. At other times the specific use of force may be identical, and the only difference is the intent behind the action. Either way, the intention to use only the force necessary to protect supports the possibility of maintaining human connection with the person against whom we use the force.

Using force in these situations goes beyond preventing harm. If our hearts remain open, we continue to aim for sufficient connection to arrive at a solution that works for everyone. We are more likely to get there if we are successful at maintaining a clear, unwavering commitment to upholding the dignity and humanity of those against whom we are using force. This will help us remember, when we come back to dialogue, the experience of others, and especially that of being forced.

Through this lens, Gandhi's noncooperation can be seen as a form of protective use of force and may well have been the inspiration for Marshall Rosenberg's understanding.

The question of the relationship between force and nonviolence is not easily resolved. For example, Gandhi said: "I can only teach you not to bow your heads before any one even at the cost of your life." Clearly he was willing to die for what he was working towards. Does this mean he wouldn't put up an arm to shield himself from a blow if personally attacked? Does force ever cross over into violence even when used to protect? It seems to me that these are questions to continue to grapple with rather than try to resolve once and for all. It is my belief that Gandhi himself continued to wrestle with questions about nonviolence throughout his life and work.

Did Gandhi use force to work towards his goals? Force looks different depending on how much power we have in a situation. Gandhi didn't have a lot of political power in relation to the British, and could not directly "force" them to do anything. Knowing this, Gandhi opted for different forms of power based on different resources. He cultivated a level of personal power, already apparent by the late 1920s, through the incredible personal appeal he had, to both sides. He also mobilized a mass of people willing to endure anything. I see a group of people with that level of commitment as an enormously powerful force. Used strategically, these two forces - his personal power and the mobilized group - did dictate outcomes without harming the British rulers. Such use of force is consistent with my understanding of nonviolence.

## **6. From Opposition to Vision**

One of the key aspects of Gandhi's noncooperation was that the campaigns regularly went beyond protest and included an element of what Sharif Abdullah called "vision implementation" (personal communication, 2003) – the actions themselves prefigure the outcome desired. One clear example is the 1930 Salt march. In response to a law forbidding Indians to make their own salt, Gandhi led a march to the sea to claim the free salt. This wasn't a boycott; it was a clear focus on self-sufficiency and independence, with a strong message of removing the legitimacy of British rule (*Gandhi the Man*, p. 70).

Another example is from the Civil Rights Movement which was profoundly inspired by Gandhi's example. The young activists actively challenged segregation. In choosing to enter and sit at lunch counters together across racial divisions, they implemented their vision of a world in which racial barriers are removed, which goes beyond an act of protest.

Noncooperation in the form of civil disobedience was only one component of Gandhi's scheme. He saw the struggle for independence as made up of both what Michael Nagler calls "Obstructive Programme" and a detailed Constructive Programme. The role of Obstructive Programme was to interfere with the British rulers' ability to carry out their control of the nation. The role of Constructive Programme was to create the material and social infrastructure that would provide the foundation for the future society.

Although a full exploration of Gandhi's programs is beyond the scope of this article, some points are particularly relevant, especially the importance that Gandhi assigned to the constructive side of the work towards independence. He maintained, in fact,

“... that Civil Disobedience is not absolutely necessary to win freedom through purely non-violent effort, if the co-operation of the whole nation is secured in the Constructive Programme. But such good luck rarely favours nations or individuals. Therefore, it is necessary to know the place of Civil Disobedience in a nation-wide non-violent effort.”  
(*Constructive programme: Its meaning and place*, 1941).<sup>3</sup>

Gandhi's program had eighteen elements in it, including abolishing untouchability, establishing gender equality, what he called village uplift, and achieving economic equality. At its heart was the freeing of India from the imposed economic dependence on the British through the means of re-learning the ancient art of weaving cotton. In some ways Gandhi saw this aspect of the program as the most essential. When asked in 1940 “What will it really take to get the British off our backs?” his response was: “Phenomenal progress in spinning.” (*Search for a Nonviolent Future*, p. 177) He saw “Constructive programme [as] a Solar System and the charkha [spinning wheel] [as] the Sun”. (*Search for a Nonviolent Future*, p. 183)

To my knowledge, a coherent constructive program has not emerged for current nonviolent social movements who identify as such, and their work is primarily focused on obstruction, with a more narrow focus on protest than Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. applied to their work.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, what is missing for a constructive program is a core activity with a role similar to that of spinning in Gandhi's days. That role is threefold: an activity that produces concrete material results, that is essential for creating the future, and that *anyone* can undertake.<sup>5</sup>

This principle of nonviolence – the focus on what we want to create, not just what we oppose – is not as widely known as others despite being so foundational to Gandhi's way of thinking and acting.

This principle is also fundamental to the practice of NVC. If others' actions – individuals, groups, or institutions – are to our liking, we can move towards what we want by waking up to celebration and gratitude. At all times, we can move towards what we want by initiating and sustaining actions and projects grounded in our deepest vision. Then we are more prepared to maintain our nonviolence by remembering and staying grounded in what we want when people are doing things we don't like. Knowing what we are working towards allows us to bring all the love we have to our actions and act with care for others' well-being.

---

<sup>3</sup> See also a fuller description in:

[http://www.gandhimanibhavan.org/gandhiphilosophy/philosophy\\_consprogrammes\\_bookwritten.htm](http://www.gandhimanibhavan.org/gandhiphilosophy/philosophy_consprogrammes_bookwritten.htm)

<sup>4</sup> There are hundreds of movements, communities, groups, and individuals who are participating in creating an alternative future through multiple actions such as different forms of education, providing free health care, permaculture and other forms of sustainable food growing, alternative energy, climate change work, and many many others. At present, I don't see any of these as forming a coherent, self-aware constructive *program* rather than a collection of uncoordinated actions.

<sup>5</sup> Some potential candidates that are being explored by nonviolence advocates are food growing, silence, and transforming human relations. A discussion of these emerging directions for constructive program would go beyond the scope of this article.

Just as much as constructive program is often absent from social change movements, in daily life more often than not we focus on trying to stop or move away from what's not working rather than reflect and connect with ourselves sufficiently to know what is important to us, what we really want, and move towards it by engaging the other party in dialogue.

Indeed, perhaps the heart of the practice of NVC revolves around understanding our needs, being able to get to sufficient connection with ourselves to know what matters to us on the most fundamental human level. Once we know the needs, we can then consider what strategies can help meet those needs, and make requests of others to increase the chances of having our needs met. It is through understanding the needs that we move from opposing others or giving up to engaging in dialogue towards creating mutually beneficial solutions.

## **7. Nonviolence Begins with Inner Practice**

As big and ambitious as Gandhi's campaigns were, he regularly reminded everyone of the very individual nature of his practice. He wrote extensively about his own personal journey as being integral to his work, and likened nonviolence to a search for truth, starting from the inside out.

“What I want to achieve – what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years – is self-realization.” (*Gandhi's life in his own words*, p. 1)

“The very first step in non-violence is that we cultivate in our daily life, as between ourselves, truthfulness, humility, tolerance, loving kindness.” (*Golden Treasury*, p. 41)

Gandhi saw at least three intertwined reasons for the centrality of a personal practice: increasing strength and effectiveness, cultivating acceptance, and finding meaning. As he saw it, the strength and confidence necessary to maintain a loving presence in the face of opposition, oppression, and ridicule could only come from an exacting inner practice.

“Love and *ahimsa*... presuppose self-confidence which in its turn presupposes self-purification.” (*Young India* 18-02-1926, *Non Violent Resistance*, p. 345)

Inner practice in the form of a great deal of honesty and humility also served as the reference point for sustaining his commitment to non-judgment.

“It is not for us to sit in judgment over anyone, so long as we notice a single fault in ourselves and wish our friends not to forsake us in spite of such fault. Being myself full of blemishes, and therefore in need of charity of fellow beings, I have learnt not to judge anyone harshly, and to make allowance for defects that I might detect”. (*Harijan*, 11-3-1939, p. 47)

The practice of nonviolence also provided Gandhi with unexpected gifts in terms of his own well-being. Gandhi believed in nonviolence for its own sake, whether or not the desired results could be attained. The depth at which he practiced opened up avenues for inner peace and wonder that no doubt sustained him in times of great anguish at the pace of his campaign and at the conflicts within his movement.

“Whatever may be the result, there is always in me conscious struggle for following the law of nonviolence deliberately and ceaselessly. Such struggle leaves one stronger for it. The more I work at this law, the more I feel the delight in my life, the delight in the scheme of the universe. It gives me a peace and a meaning of the mysteries of nature that I have no power to describe.” (*Search for a Nonviolent Future*, p. 101)

Here, again, the practice of NVC follows in the footsteps of Gandhi’s own practice. I have already alluded to how essential it is, for practicing NVC, to know intimately our inner landscape and recognize what we need. As simple as this may sound, it can be enormously challenging in moments when we are unhappy with others’ or our own actions.

I want to illustrate this with two specific aspects of NVC. The first is about learning to live with and tolerate the experience of unmet needs without getting so agitated that we jump to action. Nonviolence is born of inner peace. If we are out of balance, we are much more likely to be reactive and unable to maintain the strength and clarity necessary for the love and openness that are such a hallmark of nonviolence. This particular aspect of the practice calls for developing a level of non-attachment by remaining in close connection with the needs without focusing on the strategies to get the needs met. In addition to inner peace this practice support self-connection and creativity in finding alternate strategies for the unmet needs.

The second aspect of the practice of NVC I want to highlight is working on self-acceptance. Just as Gandhi recognized that being honest about his own flaws could be a way to develop compassion for others, so practicing NVC supports non-judgment of others by recognizing and connecting with the needs that lead to any action or thought we don’t like in ourselves. Shifting focus from judgment to needs in regard to ourselves increases the chances we may do the same with others. Moreover, the specific focus on needs increases our capacity to see and hear needs, in anyone, even when they are not expressed directly, which for most people is almost all the time. Connecting with needs, our own and others’, is surprisingly effective at increasing acceptance and a sense of continuity of humanity between us and others whose actions may be very different from our own.

### **Parting Words**

With such strong ties to Gandhi’s legacy, I am happy to continue to use and embrace the term he himself used to describe this form of love. I feel such delight and honor to be associated with this tradition that embraces so many aspects of love: compassion, fierceness, courage, and an uncompromising willingness to stand for truth.

For the past 15 years, I have been dedicating my life to the quest for full nonviolent living. I want to keep learning and exploring what nonviolence means. I want to live this intense love; model it as best I know how, and more; expose and seek support for the places where I falter; and support others who want the same, who want to grow their capacity to love everyone, including themselves.

## Bibliography

- Ajgaonkar, Sri Meghshyam, ed., *Mahatma: A Golden Treasury of Wisdom -Thoughts & Glimpses of Life*. T. Mumbai: Anand Limye, India Printing Works
- Easwaran, Eknath, *Gandhi the Man*. Berkeley, CA: The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, 1978.
- Gandhi, M.K., *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, 1941.
- Gandhi, M.K., *Harijan*, (weekly journal published first by Gandhi between 1933 and 1956).
- Gandhi, M.K., *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Ed Navajivan Trust, 1938.
- Gandhi, M.K., *Non-Violent Resistance*. Ed Schocken Books. New York, 1951.
- Gandhi, M.K., *Young India* (weekly journal published by Gandhi between 1919 and 1932).
- Gandhi Smarak Nidhi (institution), *Gandhi and Mani Bhavan 1917-1934: a short story*. Booklet from the Museum Mani Bhavan, Mumbai, India.
- Kripalani, Krishan, *All Men Are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi as told in His Own Words*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1960.
- Kripalani, Krishan, *Gandhi's life in his own words*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1983.
- Meghani, Mahendra, ed., *Everyman's a...b...c...of Gandhi*. Bhavnagar: Sabarmati Ashram Preservation and Memorial Trust and Lokmilap Trust.
- Nagler, Michael. *Is there no other way? The Search for a Nonviolent Future*. Ed. Berkeley Hills, Berkeley, 2001.
- Nayar, Pysarelal Sushila, *In Gandhiji's Mirror*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Radhakrishnan, S., *Mahatma Gandhi: Essays and reflections on his life and work*. Mumbai, Jaico Publishing House 1956-1995.
- Rosenberg, Marshall. *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, Encinitas, CA, Puddle Dancer Press, 2003.
- Shukla, Chandrashekar, *Incidents In Gandhi's Life*, Bombay, 1949.

PDF | In this paper, I discuss the communication principles that regulate scientific enquiry and investigate why these principles have relevance to the Gandhian method of nonviolent dissent. In doing so, I argue that scientific enquiry should not be mistaken for the ways...<sup>Â</sup> We use cookies to make interactions with our website easy and meaningful, to better understand the use of our services, and to tailor advertising. For further information, including about cookie settings, please read our [Cookie Policy](#) . By continuing to use this site, you consent to the use of cookies. Got it.