

Satyagraha and the Inner Life

Third Edition

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Preface

Our world suffers for lack of leaders rooted in the traditions of nonviolence. When conflicts arise, many leaders teach us to wield threats, coercion, and harm. When unfamiliar perspectives disturb, many leaders rally us to certainty and defensiveness. When decisions must be made, many leaders encourage us to value self-interest, immediacy, and possession. As we follow these guides, the fabric of our community weakens, and life becomes more difficult for ourselves and others. For those who desire a different approach to social change, satyagraha offers a useful model.

Mohandas Gandhi, who famously experimented with the possibilities of nonviolence, coined the Sanskrit term *satyagraha* to identify a method of social change. Gandhi proposed that *satya* (truth) combined with *agraha* (firmness) creates a useful social power that does not rely on harming others. Gandhi often referred to this power as “truth-force.”

Satyagraha is an adherence to truth as it unfolds. Since many perspectives are necessary in order to see what is true, satyagraha offers a way to create change that recognizes both our incomplete understanding of any given situation and the wisdom that others have to share. It is a way of directly engaging with others to work out the difficult aspects of life without resorting to coercion, harm, or ill intention. Satyagraha is the social power which arises when we act with kindness, respect, patience, generosity, and selfless service.

Satyagraha is often regarded simply as a strategy. Even during the Gandhian campaign to liberate India from colonial rule, many *satyagrahis* (practitioners of satyagraha) understood the practice merely as civil disobedience or protest. While noncooperation is one tool at the satyagrahi’s disposal, satyagraha is largely an inner discipline: we transform society by transforming ourselves and by engaging with others in a spirit that encourages their reflection and self-transformation.

The following essays explore this inner discipline. The first edition of *Satyagraha and the Inner Life* was a series of twelve handouts I prepared for the inaugural program of Satyagraha Institute in 2015. (The Institute trains leaders in the traditions of nonviolence, and a core goal of the program is to explore how attention to the inner life can support our work for social change.) The second edition was a major revision and expansion. This third edition includes minor corrections and format changes for easy distribution.

Our habits of violence are driven by fear, hatred, self-centeredness, clinging, and similar interior strife. If we hope to create social change without leaving a broad wake of suffering, we must tend to these matters of the inner life.

Clark Hanjian
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To heal our society, our psyches must heal as well. The military, social, and environmental dangers that threaten us do not come from sources outside the human heart; they are reflections of it, mirroring the fears, greeds, and hostilities that separate us from ourselves and each other. For our sanity and our survival, therefore, it appears necessary to engage in spiritual as well as social change, to merge the inner with the outer paths.¹

Joanna Macy

Developing Ease

One obstacle in the work of nonviolent social change is our agitated mind. Our attention is often scattered. Our heart is often not at ease. Our best qualities are often not readily accessible.

Part of the work of satyagraha is restoring our equilibrium and presence, for the benefit of others. Meditation, a practice observed in many traditions, serves as one tool for developing ease.

To begin, we stop our activity, we calm down, and we allow the mental agitation to settle. Once the busyness has eased, we sharpen our awareness of what is happening and gain some clarity on the many factors contributing to the current situation. We also become more attuned to how we physically feel. We listen to what our body says about what is happening within our relationships and within ourselves.

As we develop this calm mind, this careful attention, and this physical awareness, we begin to look and see: What do we do that increases suffering? What do we do that increases ease?

When we investigate these questions, our understanding deepens, and we slowly change. This is one path to cultivate ease in our hearts and minds, for the benefit of others.

Nonviolence is impossible without self-purification.²

Mohandas Gandhi

When a rebel army took over a Korean town, all fled the Zen temple except the abbot. The rebel general burst into the temple and was incensed to find that the master refused to greet him, let alone receive him as a conqueror.

“Don’t you know,” shouted the general, “that you are looking at one who can run you through without batting an eye?”

“And you,” said the abbot, “are looking at one who can be run through without batting an eye!”

The general’s scowl turned into a smile. He bowed and left the temple.³

Traditional Zen Story

- Think of a recent conflict or difficult situation. What was the quality of heart/spirit/mind that you brought to this situation?
- What circumstances make you feel uneasy, especially in your work for social change?
- What is one practice that you currently do to restore your equilibrium, so you can bring your best qualities to difficult situations?
- What is one habit of your heart or mind that you would like to improve?

Intending No Harm

In the heat of conflict, we often consider bringing harm to our opponent, directly or indirectly, physically or emotionally, quickly or over time. In moments of reflection, though, we know that these harmful intentions only undermine our efforts to resolve the conflict.

If we want to approach our adversaries in a nonviolent manner, we begin by nurturing our intention to bring no harm. On the outside, this means training ourselves to refrain from physical and verbal violence, but the essential training occurs in the heart. Our challenge, when we approach our adversary, is to desire no harm, desire no offense, and desire no humiliation.

We can wrestle with these intentions by asking a few questions: Would I wish my adversary well, even under the worst circumstances? Would I take some action to support my adversary's well-being? Would I decline to take advantage of a misfortune befalling my adversary? Would I defend my adversary from a third-party attack? A "No" to any of these questions is a doorway for further investigation.

Harmful intentions, however subtle, negatively impact the quality of our relationship with our adversary. As we develop skill with uncovering and addressing these intentions, we become better able to work for social change in a genuine spirit of nonviolence.

Mind is the forerunner of all actions.
All deeds are led by mind, created by mind.
If one speaks or acts with a corrupt mind, suffering follows,
as the wheel follows the hoof of an ox pulling a cart.
If one speaks or acts with a serene mind, happiness follows,
as surely as one's shadow.⁴

The Buddha

Literally speaking, *ahimsa* means non-killing. But to me it has a world of meaning and takes me into realms much higher Ahimsa really means that you may not offend anybody, you may not harbour an uncharitable thought even in connection with one who may consider himself to be your enemy. . . . If we resent a friend's action or the so-called enemy's action, we still fall short of this doctrine. But when I say we should not resent, I do not say that we should acquiesce: but by resenting I mean wishing that some harm should be done to the enemy, or that he should be put out of the way, not by any action of ours, but by even the action of somebody else, or, say, by Divine Agency. If we harbour even this thought, we depart from this doctrine of ahimsa.⁵

Mohandas Gandhi

[Satyagraha] excludes every form of violence, direct or indirect, veiled or unveiled, and whether in thought, word or deed. It is a breach of satyagraha to wish ill to an opponent or to say a harsh word to him or of him with the intention of harming him. And often the evil thought or the evil word may, in terms of satyagraha, be more dangerous than actual violence used in the heat of the moment and perhaps repented and forgotten the next moment. Satyagraha is gentle, it never wounds. It must not be the result of anger or malice. It is never fussy, never impatient, never vociferous. It is the direct opposite of compulsion. It was conceived as a complete substitute for violence.⁶

Mohandas Gandhi

- Think of a specific adversary or group that raises your anxiety. What are your intentions toward this person or group?
- Before engaging an adversary, what practices might you do in order to be sufficiently clear about your intentions?

Observing Change

One of the fundamental qualities of life is unceasing change. Everything emerges, evolves, and fades away. Circumstances are always changing because their underlying causes and conditions are unstable.

An obstacle in the work of nonviolent social change is that, in our inner life, we tend to view people and circumstances as stable. We do this because it makes our world easier to understand. Unfortunately, this illusion interferes with our work. For example:

- When we believe that *circumstances* are unlikely to change, we close our awareness to emerging opportunities. To the degree that we believe “this is the way it is,” we discourage creative problem solving.
- When we believe that *individuals* are unlikely to change, we abandon a core principle of satyagraha: the possibility that we can touch our adversary’s heart and thereby create new opportunities for collaboration.

As we increase our awareness of constant change, we increase our ability to approach difficulties with lightness and flexibility. We also develop a greater alertness to new possibilities and ripe moments.

Impermanence is what makes transformation possible.
We should learn to say, “Long live impermanence.”⁷

Thich Nhat Hanh

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. Nonviolence takes account precisely of this dynamic and non-final state of all relationships among [people], for nonviolence seeks to change relationships that are evil into others that are good, or at least less bad.⁸

Thomas Merton

- Think of a conflict in which you are involved. How has an adversary or circumstances changed in unexpected ways?
- When you consider your adversary, what is one characteristic you believe will never change? How does this affect your relationship with that person?
- Over the years, what is one way you have changed in an unexpected way?
- In satyagraha, the possibility of changing oneself is as important as the possibility of another changing. How do you feel about telling an adversary that you have had a change of mind, or a change of heart?

Leaving Room for Error

The full truth of a situation is rarely 100% apparent. Many perspectives are necessary in order to see what is true. Thus, satyagraha is an adherence to truth as it unfolds.

A satyagrahi acknowledges two sometimes uncomfortable realities: our incomplete understanding of the situation, and the wisdom that others have to share.

Since there is always a chance that our perspective on a conflict is incorrect or incomplete, we should use methods that are flexible enough to:

- Provide our adversary with some benefit of the doubt,
- Provide us with opportunities to gather more information about the situation,
- Leave space so that we might have a change of mind or a change of heart, and
- Allow us to explore options that might be better than anything we can envision at the moment.

When times are difficult, we tend to cling to our perspective, despite whatever new information arises. Our challenge during these times is to leave room for the possibility that we do not see the full picture.

[Satyagraha's] root meaning is holding on to truth; hence truth-force. I have also called it love-force or soul-force. In the application of satyagraha, I discovered in the earliest stages that pursuit of truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one's opponent, but that he must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy. For what appears to be truth to the one may appear to be error to the other. And patience means self-suffering. So the doctrine came to mean vindication of truth, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on one's self.⁹

Mohandas Gandhi

A test of our sincerity in the practice of nonviolence is this: are we willing to learn something from our adversaries? If a new truth is made known to us by them or through them, will we accept it? Are we willing to admit that they are not totally inhumane, wrong, unreasonable, cruel, and so on? This is important. If they see that we are completely incapable of listening to them with an open mind, our nonviolence will have nothing to say to them except that we distrust them and seek to outwit them.

Our readiness to see some good in them and to agree with some of their ideas (though tactically this might look like a weakness on our part), actually gives us power: the power of sincerity and of truth. On the other hand, if we are obviously unwilling to accept any truth that we have not first discovered and declared ourselves, we show by that very fact that we are interested not in the truth so much as in "being right." Since adversaries are presumably interested in being right also, and in proving themselves right by what they consider the superior argument of force, we end up where we started.

Nonviolence has great power, provided that it really witnesses to truth and not just to self-righteousness.¹⁰

Thomas Merton

- Think of a conflict in which you are involved. What are some of your certainties that might deserve investigation?
- What is your adversary always repeating or persisting about? Is this something that might deserve more careful consideration?
- What are your concerns about acknowledging that an adversary makes a good point or has a valid concern?

Offering Generosity

One of the primary ways we cultivate ease and freedom in the work of nonviolent social change is by offering generosity. We do this with three important actions:

- We rejoice in the good fortune of others.
- Where such fortune is lacking, we observe what is needed and offer material aid, instruction, forgiveness, and fearlessness.
- We give to all, regardless of their status, actions, or mental states.

By practicing generosity, we not only benefit others with our aid, but we lessen the pain of our own self-concern, thereby benefitting others with our unfettered mind. Generosity opens a door to conversation.

Gandhi recalled the following stanza in his autobiography, saying that it “gripped my mind and heart. It’s precept – return good for evil – became my guiding principle.”

For a bowl of water, give a goodly meal;
For a kindly greeting, bow thou down with zeal;
For a simple penny, pay thou back with gold;
If thy life be rescued, life do not withhold.

Thus the words and actions of the wise regard;
Every little service tenfold they reward.
But the truly noble know all men as one,
And return with gladness good for evil done.¹¹

Gujarati Poem

When we make offerings of real value, the act of giving so runs against the grain of our habitual selfishness that the effect is liberating. Giving enables us to let go of those attachments that increase our vulnerability and fear. In this way, the practice ventilates the claustrophobia of self-absorption¹²

Pema Chodron

Nonviolence has a different logic. It recognizes that sin is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action’s constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing [people] from what they have done unknowingly.¹³

Hannah Arendt

Generosity is doing justice without requiring justice.¹⁴

Junaid

- Think of a conflict in which you are involved. What might happen if you were more generous of heart with the adversary? What might happen if you offered more material resources to help address the adversary’s needs?
- Would you be willing to place your adversary’s well-being over your own? If not, why not?
- What might you do in order to nurture your qualities of generosity?

Envisioning the Adversary as Partner

We habitually view our adversary as an obstacle – someone blocking the way to a fair and peaceful resolution. If we want to approach conflict in the spirit of satyagraha, our challenge is to transform this habit so we view our adversary as a vital partner. The path to peaceful coexistence depends on this shift of perspective.

In order to move from “adversary as obstacle” to “adversary as partner,” we do not need to deny the reality of our differences. We do not need to ignore injustices. But we do need to acknowledge that any meaningful and durable resolution will involve communicating, planning, and implementing as collaborators. This difficult leap is primarily work of the inner life.

One task is to move from toleration of differences to genuine respect of differences. When we tolerate differences, we simply muster our strength to endure what is unpleasant about our adversary. But, when we genuinely respect differences, we value the unfamiliar perspectives, experiences, and insights that our adversary brings to the table. In order to make this shift, we must turn inward and ease some of our clinging to ego and certainty.

Another task is to move from making perfunctory displays of respect to acting in a way that might truly be felt by our adversary as respectful. We can sense the difference between these two approaches, and our adversary can too. In order to make this shift, we must cultivate a genuine desire to affirm our adversary’s humanity, best intentions, and good-faith efforts.

Envisioning the adversary as partner is a spiritual practice. As we soften the edges of our self-concern, possibilities for reconciliation multiply.

The satyagrahi cooperates with the evil-doer in what is good, for he has no hatred for him. On the contrary, he has nothing but friendship for him. Through cooperating with him in what is not evil, the satyagrahi wins him over from evil.¹⁵

Bharatan Kumarappa

In satyagraha, dogma gives way to an open exploration of context. The objective is not to assert propositions, but to create possibilities. . . . The process forces a continuing examination of one’s own motives, an examination undertaken within the context of relationships as they are changed towards a new, restructured, and reintegrated pattern.¹⁶

Joan Bondurant

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference . . . is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.¹⁷

Audre Lorde

- Think of an adversary. How do you feel about the quality of your partnership? What is a small step you might take to improve your mutual sense of partnership.
- What is one characteristic about your adversary that makes you uncomfortable? What inner work might you do to move from toleration to genuine respect?

Focusing on Means

The popular approach to conflict focuses on “ends.” We are encouraged, at every turn, to know what we want, to maneuver around our adversary’s interests, and to get results quickly, by any means available.

Focusing on ends might bring quick results, but these results typically lack substance. Alleged solutions end up being short-sighted and inadequate because they ignore deep-rooted causes of the conflict. At first, the conflict appears to be resolved, but soon thereafter the resolution begins to unravel. Moreover, by focusing intently on ends, we typically leave our adversaries dissatisfied, hurt, angry, and vengeful. These feelings set the stage for old conflicts to resurface and new conflicts to emerge.

The nonviolent approach to conflict focuses on “means.” Rather than defining our desired results, we define the values and principles that we want to guide how we relate with our adversary. Rather than maneuvering around our adversary’s interests, we look for ways to incorporate our adversary’s interests into solutions that are mutually beneficial. Rather than seizing results quickly, we invest time to craft results that are sustainable.

In regard to the inner life, our challenge is to cultivate the strength to move against the popular stream. Media, entertainment, politics, and business typically encourage us to value ends over means. The way of nonviolence encourages us to value means over ends.

A general principle of nonviolence is that we engage our adversary in a way that embodies the outcome we desire. If we plant apple seeds, we do not expect to see orange trees. Likewise, if we desire to live in a world where practices such as respect, understanding, truthfulness, and compassion are the norm, then we must endeavor to use these methods when approaching conflict – even under the most demanding circumstances.

If I want to deprive you of your watch, I shall certainly have to fight for it; if I want to buy your watch, I shall have to pay for it; and if I want a gift, I shall have to plead for it; and, according to the means I employ, the watch is stolen property, my own property, or a donation. Thus we see three different results from the three different means. Will you still say that means do not matter?¹⁸

Mohandas Gandhi

Point not the goal until you plot the course
For ends and means to man are tangled so
That different means quite different aims enforce
Conceive the means as end in embryo.¹⁹

Ferdinand Lassalle

- How do you feel about approaching a conflict without a well-defined solution in mind?
- Think of an adversary. Are you able to state their several interests clearly and accurately? How do you feel about investing time and energy to address these interests in a meaningful way?
- Which values and principles feel important to you but always pose a challenge due to the time and energy they require? When you consider means and ends, how do you weigh the short-term against the long-term?

Living Simply

When we aim to consume and possess, we create two obstacles in our work for nonviolent social change.

First, when we feel that we must devote significant attention to acquiring and maintaining the stuff of our lives (homes, vehicles, tools, comforts, etc.), our time, energy, and patience for others diminish.

Second, when we feel the need to protect and hold on to the stuff of our lives, we create new opportunities for conflict and defensiveness.

Living simply helps us to reduce the causes for conflict and makes it easier for us to be present for the benefit of others.

It is said often and with some scorn, “Why don’t [Catholic Workers] get jobs and help the poor that way? Why are they living off others, begging?”

It would complicate things, I can only explain, to give Roger a salary for his work of fourteen hours a day in the kitchen, clothes room and house; to pay Jane a salary for running the women’s house; and Beth and Annabelle for giving out clothes . . . and helping with the sick and the poor . . . and then have them all turn the money right back in to support the work. Or to make it more complicated they might all go out and get jobs, and bring the money home to pay their board and room and the salaries of others to run the house. It is simpler just to be poor. It is simpler to beg. . . .

Through voluntary poverty we will have the means to help our neighbor. We cannot see our neighbor in need without stripping ourselves. It is the only way we have of showing our love.²⁰

Dorothy Day

Once some robbers came into the monastery and said to one of the elders: We have come to take away everything that is in your cell. And he said: My sons, take all you want. So they took everything they could find in the cell and started off. But they left behind a little bag that was hidden in the cell. The elder picked it up and followed after them, crying out: My sons, take this, you forgot it in the cell! Amazed at the patience of the elder, they brought everything back into his cell and did penance²¹

Desert Fathers (4th cent, CE)

The Eight Realizations of the Great Beings says, “Always searching for possessions and never feeling fulfilled causes impure actions ever to increase. Bodhisattvas [those with awake minds and good hearts] go in the opposite direction and always remember the principle of having few desires.” . . . In the context of modern society, simple living also means to remain as free as possible from the destructive momentum of the social and economic machine We must be determined to oppose the type of modern life filled with pressures and anxieties that so many people now live. The only way out is to consume less. . . . Once we are able to live simply and happily, we will be better able to help others.²²

Thich Nhat Hanh

- What do you cling to? Why is this thing so important to you?
- What is one piece of your life you might simplify in order to be more present and nimble in your work with others? What is the first step you might take in order to make this change?

Growing Comfortable with Insults

Insults offend us and rattle our egos. One unskillful comment or unkindly gesture from an adversary can plunge us into turmoil and crush our cooperative spirit. For this reason, insults are a hazard in the work of nonviolent social change.

In times of conflict, there is a good chance that insults will burst forth. Our challenge, in the spirit of nonviolence, is to grow comfortable with dodging this debris and not clinging to each insult that comes our way.

When we feel insulted, we can certainly acknowledge and be present with our feelings. But we also might explore whether the insult was intended or not. The alleged insulter might only have been trying to clarify their perspective, express their feelings, or offer constructive criticism. Even the best communicators are unskillful at times, especially in the midst of stress. If we face unskillful communication, rather than harmful intent, we might:

- Allow our adversary's unskillful words and actions to flow by, without dwelling on them or being defensive.
- Make note of any uncomfortable truths about ourselves to which our adversary points.
- Explore and highlight our adversary's best intentions.
- Identify and discuss any shared perspectives or interests.
- Disrupt the unskillful behavior with an act of kindness, thereby creating a space so that communication might resume with greater care.

If an insult appears to be intended, and our adversary is genuinely trying to offend us, we might explore the circumstances behind this intention. Is our adversary feeling disrespected, angry, or defensive? Is he doing the best he can (given his particular lifetime of conditioning) to deal with these difficult emotions? In this situation, several options can be pursued in the spirit of nonviolence. We can:

- Acknowledge the adversary's feelings against us, thereby opening the door to communication about other things.
- Acknowledge the offense without reacting to it or internalizing it, thereby communicating to the adversary that insults will not drive the relationship.
- Respond to the offense with an act of kindness, thereby creating a dissonance that might create a new opportunity for communication.

As we refine our inner life, we become more skillful and comfortable with converting insults into opportunities for reconciliation.

Somebody once hit Bayazid Bistami with a stick. The stick broke. The venerable saint took a new stick and a bowl of honey and gave them to the man who had struck him, saying, "Because of my face, your stick broke and you suffered loss, so here is a new one in its place and some honey for you to eat."²³

Sheikh Muzaffer

Nothing is so useful to the beginner as insults. The beginner who bears insults is like a tree that is watered every day.²⁴

Abba Isaiah

- Think of a time when someone intended to insult you. How did you handle the offense? How might you have handled it differently?
- Think of a time when you felt insulted, and later came to learn that no insult was intended. Since no insult was intended, what caused you to feel disrespected?
- Think of a time when someone felt insulted by what you said or did, even though you intended no insult at all. How did you feel when your intentions were misunderstood?

Non-Attachment to Results

In most campaigns and conflicts, we feel certain that we know what is best. We have our vision. We have our goals.

At the same time, we can observe that one of the fundamental qualities of life is incompleteness. Everything, no matter how wonderful, is always bound by some imperfection or lacking. No experience, thing, or set of circumstances has the capacity to satisfy us completely.

An obstacle in the work of nonviolent social change is that, in our inner life, we cling to the illusion of satisfaction. In other words, we hold tight to the view that certain conditions will set everything right in a reliable and sustainable way. We believe that all will be well *if only* certain circumstances are met (*if only* we could get enough money, *if only* they would not interfere, *if only* she would apologize, etc.).

Of course, our perfect solutions are never perfect. They fall short or unravel for all sorts of reasons. We simply cannot account for all the changing conditions and unforeseen consequences that arise over time.

One way to ease our attachment to specific results is to practice observing incompleteness in daily life. This practice supports the work of nonviolent social change in two ways.

First, as our awareness of incompleteness becomes more stable, our desire for quick fixes subsides. This space allows us to be more diligent about crafting adaptable and flexible solutions.

Second, as our awareness of incompleteness becomes more stable, it is easier for us to let go of specific solutions and depend more on the skills and relationships that are required when our solutions inevitably need to be revised.

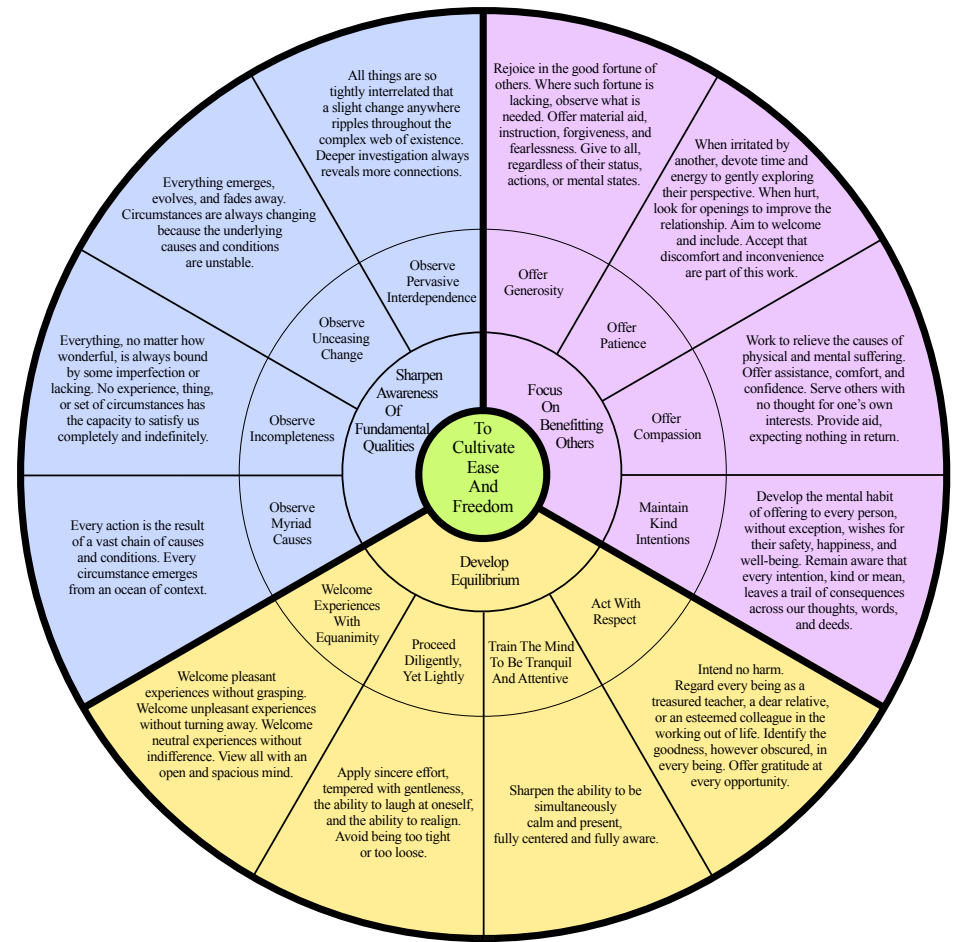
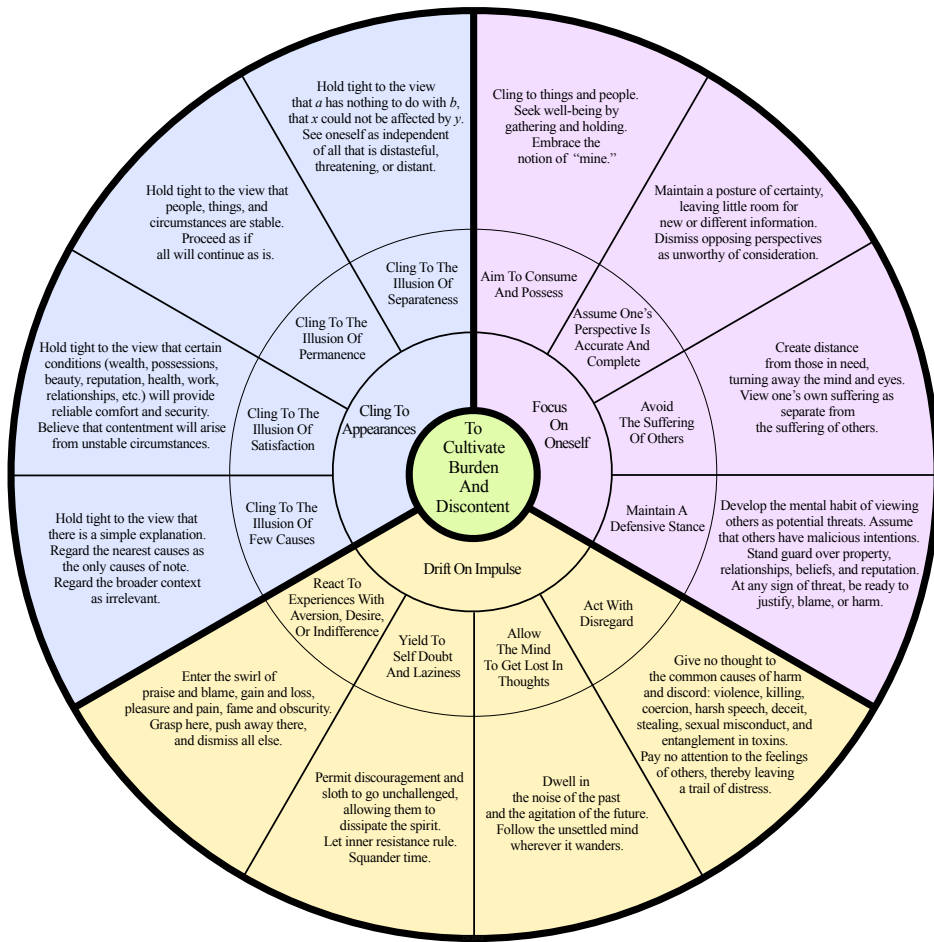
What we do is very little. But it is like the little boy with a few loaves and fishes. Christ took that little and increased it. He will do the rest. What we do is so little we may seem to be constantly failing. But so did He fail. He met with apparent failure on the Cross. But unless the seed fall into the earth and die, there is no harvest. And why must we see results? Our work is to sow. Another generation will be reaping the harvest.²⁵

Dorothy Day

Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. And there too a great deal has to be gone through, as gradually you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. The range tends to narrow down, but it gets much more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.²⁶

Thomas Merton

- Think of a conflict or campaign in which you are involved. What is the result you seek? Imagine and describe a totally different outcome that might feel acceptable.
- How do you feel when things do not go as planned? How do you usually respond? How might you respond differently?
- How do you balance the need to enact concrete plans with the need to be flexible?



Whatever we believe about the great mysteries – our source, our destiny, powers beyond this human realm – we awake every morning to the matters of daily life. We face a constant stream of mundane moments, each offering the opportunity to create more suffering or well-being. At every turn, we change the universe.

Valuing the Spiritual Traditions of Others

Much of humanity follows one spiritual tradition or another. These traditions provide guidance to navigate the great mysteries and dilemmas of life. They provide a framework to help followers make sense of their role in the universe. Even those who follow no particular spiritual tradition typically have some overarching belief system that serves a similar purpose.

In the field of nonviolent social change, we inevitably work with adversaries and allies who follow different spiritual traditions. Our challenge is to welcome these unfamiliar worldviews to the table and explore the insights and truths that they bring.

In order to engage with followers of other spiritual traditions in the spirit of nonviolence, we must sharpen several interior skills:

- The ability to ease the grip of certainty on our own worldview.
- The ability to listen with care about how others make sense of the world.
- The ability to gracefully and genuinely acknowledge the reality of others, even when that reality does not make sense to us.
- The ability to continue conversation and interaction, even when the worldview of another does not fit precisely with our own worldview.

When we first encounter a spiritual tradition that does not overlap easily with our own, we tend to highlight the apparent conflicts. If we want to develop a more helpful opening habit, we can begin by asking of our neighbor: “Please share with me the parts of your tradition that encourage practices such as compassion, understanding, patience, and generosity.”

The soul of religions is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms. The latter will persist to the end of time. The wise will ignore the outward crust and see the same soul living under a variety of crusts.²⁷

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I hold that it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others’ religions as we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world’s religions is a sacred duty.²⁸

•

Consider whether you are going to accept the position of mutual toleration or of equality of all religions. My position is that all the great religions are fundamentally equal. We must have the innate respect for other religions as we have for our own. Mind you, not mutual toleration, but equal respect.²⁹

Mohandas Gandhi

- What aspects of your spiritual tradition or worldview are non-negotiable? How do you feel about exploring broader interpretations of these non-negotiables?
- When someone raises a view that does not make sense with your understanding of the world, how do you react? How might you react differently, for the purpose of building the relationship?
- Think of an ally or adversary who follows a spiritual tradition that feels foreign to you. Can you identify any aspects of their tradition that fit with your worldview? How might you build on these commonalities?

Understanding the Adversary

In the Buddhist tradition, a central observance is to recognize that everything – every person, every situation, every action, every conflict, etc. – arises from a vast multitude of underlying causes and conditions. An essential task of nonviolent social change is to be alert to this ocean of context.

As satyagrahis, we want to understand the context of our adversary, including their experience and perspective, for three important reasons:

- When we investigate our adversary’s perspective, we increase our chance of learning what piece of the truth they bring to the table.
- When we comprehend our adversary’s suffering, needs, and interests, we are better able to craft solutions that are mutually beneficial and agreeable.
- When we develop genuine familiarity with our adversary’s worldview, we are more likely to act with compassion, which benefits all parties.

Consider the suicide bomber. As we explore his upbringing, community, education, opportunities, mentors, friends, mental health, etc., we begin to understand how he came to strap on the explosives and detonate himself in the crowd. If we experienced the full range of causes and conditions that shaped his life, would we not be inclined likewise? This does not mean that evil and suffering are predetermined, but it does compel us to recognize that the road to evil and suffering is paved with a vast array of circumstances. In the long-term, our mission might be to improve such circumstances. In the short-term, we must face the reality of our adversaries head on. The question is: do we resist their reality with fear and hatred, or do we engage it with understanding and compassion?

Our ability to explore causes and conditions depends directly on the quality of our inner life. When we are stressed, busy, and self-absorbed, we have little capacity to look deeply at others. When we are

at ease, mindful, and intending to be generous, we have the inner space to investigate and understand the difficulties that arise before us.

Three-fourths of the miseries and misunderstandings in the world will disappear if we step into the shoes of our adversaries and understand their standpoint. We will then agree with our adversaries quickly or think of them charitably.³⁰

Mohandas Gandhi

- Think of a recent conflict. How does this situation cause your adversary to suffer? What are your adversary’s needs? What are some of the deeper reasons behind your adversary’s actions?
- How do you feel about spending time and energy to explore the needs of your adversary?
- How intimately are you willing to investigate your adversary’s perspective? Since defensive exchanges are rarely illuminating, are you willing to explore with your adversary in multiple ways: “Why is this important to you?”

Examining Unearned Privilege

Many systems in our world provide undue advantage to some people and undue disadvantage to others. Our systems of employment, education, housing, travel, health care, law enforcement, defense, etc., all include structures and traditions which perpetuate this unfairness. For example, hiring and job-promotion systems notoriously provide unearned privileges to some people simply due to the fact that they are male, while imposing unearned disadvantages on others simply due to the fact that they are female.

The work of nonviolent social change is, largely, the work of transforming the structures and traditions that maintain such inequity. This work is difficult because systems change slowly, even with the help of sharp corrective actions and the coordinated efforts of many people. This work is also difficult because unearned privileges and disadvantages exist across all of our communities, even among satyagrahis and their allies.

In order to participate meaningfully in the work of transforming inequitable systems, those who benefit from unearned privileges must pay attention to some uncomfortable aspects of the inner life. Especially before undertaking the work of leadership, it is important to:

- Identify and acknowledge the range of privileges (personal and institutional, explicit and subtle) that one may enjoy simply on the basis of one's skin color, place of birth, sex, gender or other characteristics.
- Examine the extent to which one exercises these undue privileges without questioning or challenging them.
- Examine fears that one has about taking action that would reduce one's privilege or the collective privilege of one's group.

By engaging in this inner work, we expose and can begin to address substantial obstacles to nonviolent social change.

As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. . . . I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.

[The author provides 46 ways that she experiences white privilege.]

6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance that I am financially reliable.
18. I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
24. I can be reasonably sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.
27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, un-heard, held at a distance, or feared.

[S]ince race and sex are not the only advantaging systems at work, we need to similarly examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.³¹

Peggy McIntosh

- What unearned privileges do you have, simply on the basis of your race, nationality, sex, gender, age, place of birth, or other characteristic?
- How might these privileges interfere with your work for nonviolent social change?

Practicing Patience

Patience does not mean putting up with evil. It does not mean failing to address the causes of hardship. Rather, patience is the ability to not get caught up in the stress of our internal resistance to what is happening.

An obstacle in the work of nonviolent social change is our limited skill with patience. If we want to increase our skill, what can we do?

One approach is to experiment with reframing our attitude toward discomfort. We can try viewing minor adversity with equanimity. Not every inconvenience warrants resistance.

Additionally, we can acknowledge the benefits of accepting some discomfort. For example, discomfort can:

- Help us develop our understanding of others in similar situations,
- Motivate us to refrain from actions that bring about discomfort to others, and
- Help us cling less to our ego, and its clutter of defenses.

Another way to develop patience is by exploring the complexity of the situation at hand. Every situation is the result of a vast chain of causes and conditions. Every situation emerges from a field of context. This exploration takes time, but it improves our capacity for compassion.

When enemies or friends
Are seen to act improperly,
Be calm and call to mind
That everything arises from conditions.³²

Shantideva

Impatience is a phase of violence.³³

Mohandas Gandhi

If you take a handful of salt and pour it into a small bowl of water, the water in the bowl will be too salty to drink. But if you pour the same amount of salt into a large river, people will still be able to drink the river's water. . . . Because of its immensity, the river has the capacity to receive and transform. The river doesn't suffer at all because of a handful of salt. If your heart is small, one unjust word or act will make you suffer. But if your heart is large, if you have understanding and compassion, that word or deed will not have the power to make you suffer. You will be able to receive, embrace, and transform it in an instant. What counts here is your capacity. To transform your suffering, your heart has to be as big as the ocean.³⁴

*The Buddha (original analogy) &
Thich Nhat Hanh (interpretation)*

- Think of a conflict or campaign in which you are involved. What situations test your patience? When do you feel internal resistance to what is happening?
- Are you able to tolerate some discomfort and inconvenience in your work with adversaries? How closely do you link discomfort with feelings of anger or hatred?
- When working with others who have different perspectives, how might you develop your capacity to receive and embrace the inevitable hardships that will arise?

Entering the Fire

The daily activity of nonviolent social change typically involves service, planning, education, and building bridges. This is not crisis work. Nonetheless, from time to time, a satyagrahi faces the heat of conflict and must be prepared to enter the fire.

The fire can appear in many forms: threats, insults, physical violence, property damage, economic stranglehold, coercion, etc. When the fire arises, many people run. Others add fuel to the fire. Others stand back and hope for the fire to go out on its own. The satyagrahi, though, remains close and calmly works to extinguish the fire.

Of course, the moment of crisis is not the time to cultivate the skills necessary for entering the fire. This is one reason why it is important for the satyagrahi to tend to the inner life regularly. Many of the topics offered here illustrate long-term training we can undertake. But what about the short-term? In the heat of conflict, several contemplative practices are useful. We can look inward and ask:

- *Can I slow down?* Not every provocation by the adversary requires immediate response. When we slow down, we can usually create better options, make better decisions, and offer clearer and kinder communications.
- *Can I overlook the small offenses?* Not every provocation by the adversary requires a response or a defense. We can often make better headway on the critical issues when we let go of our desire to engage on every potential issue that arises.
- *Can I help the adversary save face?* In a crisis, our adversary typically has a heightened sensitivity to being misunderstood and misrepresented. If they risk embarrassment in the eyes of their constituencies, they are likely to compensate by escalating their attacks. Helping our adversary avoid embarrassment is not simply a tactical skill. It is an intention of the heart, requiring an inner commitment to be on the watch for our adversary's needs.

- *Can I meet this hurtful act with a genuinely kind one?* Simply asking ourselves this question helps us remain stabilized in the values of truth, understanding, and kindness. And, if the reflection enables us to offer an unlikely and unexpected act of kindness, we might alter the dynamic of the crisis.
- *Can I offer more respect or courtesy?* When we feel unable to muster any other skills, genuine gestures of respect and courtesy can help slow the spread of conflict.
- *Can I acknowledge my own difficult feelings, without being driven by them?* This skill requires long-term training. But sometimes, the question itself can help us center quickly. Can I feel anger without resorting to harm? Can I feel fear without resorting to flight? Can I feel disappointment without resorting to resignation?

To enter the fire, and not be consumed by it, requires a stable mind and heart. This stability is one of the long-term goals of the devotee of nonviolence.

Victory is impossible until we are able to keep our temper under the gravest provocation. . . . A non-cooperator is nothing if he cannot remain calm and unperturbed under a fierce fire of provocation.³⁵

A genuine satyagrahi proceeds by setting the opponent at his ease. His action never creates panic in the breast of the 'enemy.'³⁶

Mohandas Gandhi

- Think of a time when you entered directly into a crisis. What did you do that was helpful? What did you do that was not helpful?
- In regard to your inner life, what long-term training would help you improve your leadership in times of crisis?

Self-Suffering

Gandhi suggests that satyagraha excludes the use of violence because we are “not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, not competent to punish.”³⁷ Nonetheless, violence abounds. So, how might we face it? One option is self-suffering.

Self-suffering is a tool with great power, but it requires stability in the inner life. If we succumb to cowardice, self-suffering amounts to self-harm, with no redemptive qualities.

If we succumb to malice, self-suffering becomes a tool of moral coercion, wielded (often with the aid of public opinion) against our adversaries.

When we are at our best – when we are confident, when we have genuinely kind intentions toward our adversaries – we can use self-suffering to encourage our adversaries to reflect on their actions and to create openings for change.

Suffering injury in one’s own person is . . . of the essence of nonviolence and is the chosen substitute for violence to others. It is not because I value life low that I can countenance with joy thousands voluntarily losing their lives for satyagraha, but because I know that it results in the long run in the least loss of life, and, what is more, it ennoble those who lose their lives and morally enriches the world for their sacrifice.³⁸

Mohandas Gandhi

The self-suffering of satyagraha serves yet another function. It is effective to the extent to which it demonstrates sincerity and cuts through the rationalized defenses of the opponent. . . . The considered willingness to suffer – or to endure – in the satyagraha approach is the step beyond the appeal to reason which, though reason persists throughout, dominates the earlier steps of satyagraha. Suffering operates in the satyagraha strategy as a tactic for cutting through the rational defenses which the opponent may have built in opposing the initial efforts of rational persuasion³⁹

Joan Bondurant

[I]n satyagraha there is not the remotest idea of injuring the opponent. Satyagraha postulates the conquest of the adversary by suffering in one’s own person.⁴⁰

Mohandas Gandhi

- Think of a conflict or campaign in which you are involved. How might self-suffering function in this situation?
- What are your concerns about willingly taking on suffering in pursuit of truth?
- Self-suffering has the potential to embarrass our adversary. How might we conduct our suffering in such a way that encourages reflection, yet permits our adversary to save face?

Observing Interdependence

One of the fundamental qualities of life is pervasive interdependence. All things are so tightly interrelated that a slight change anywhere ripples throughout the complex web of existence. Deeper investigation always reveals more connections.

An obstacle in the work of nonviolent social change is that, in our inner life, we pay little attention to interdependence. Rather, we cling to the illusion that we are separate. For example:

- We tend to see ourselves as separate from our adversaries.
- We tend to think of ourselves as independent, and free to do as we see fit, regardless of the vast network that supports our life in the community.
- We are quick to dismiss potential connections between our own actions and the suffering of others, particularly the suffering of our adversaries.
- We often act as if our own needs and desires have little to do with the needs and desires of others.

When we observe interdependence, we train ourselves to notice connections everywhere. In the work of nonviolent social change, this means that we actively identify and highlight connections with our adversaries.

By doing this, we nurture our sense of relationship, we nurture the understanding that we are all in the same boat, and we nurture our interest in resolving the problem collaboratively.

Belief in nonviolence is based on the assumption that human nature in its essence is one and therefore unfailingly responds to the advances of love.⁴¹

Mohandas Gandhi

- Think of a conflict or campaign in which you are involved. In what subtle ways are the adversaries dependent on each other?
- Is there anything threatening or troublesome about shining the light on similarities and connections you have with your adversaries?
- Due to pervasive interdependence, the solution that is best for the community might not be the solution that is best for you alone. How do you feel about this?
- What do you need in order to have the time, space, and energy to explore your interdependence with adversaries?

Eliminating the Enemy

Our militarized culture – from our heavy investment in armed forces to our heavy consumption of violence as entertainment – promotes one central principle: eliminate the enemy. We are urged to thwart, disable, remove, or kill our adversary by any means.

Satyagraha also urges us to eliminate the enemy, but with a diametrically opposite approach. While the military devotee works to destroy the enemy, the satyagrahi works to convert the enemy into a partner, if not a friend.

A core tenet of nonviolence is that the notion of “enemy” is a construct of our inner life. The more we nourish our feelings of fear, hatred, and self-concern, the more enemies appear. Correlatively, the more we nourish our intentions of respect, generosity, and compassion, the more enemies disappear. For this reason, the work of eliminating the enemy is necessarily work of the heart.

A satyagrahi must never forget the distinction between evil and the evil-doer. He must not harbour ill will or bitterness against the latter. He may not even employ needlessly offensive language against the evil person, however unrelieved his evil might be. For it should be an article of faith with every satyagrahi that there is none so fallen in this world but can be converted by love. A satyagrahi will always try to overcome evil by good, anger by love, untruth by truth, himsa by ahimsa. There is no other way of purging the world of evil.⁴²

In the dictionary of *satyagraha* there is no enemy.⁴³

Mohandas Gandhi

To the objection that rendering good for evil only lays one open to greater evil, Erasmus replied:

If you can avoid evil by suffering it yourself, do so. Try to help your enemy by overcoming him with kindness and meekness. If this does not help, then it is better that one perish than both of you. It is better that you be enriched with the advantage of patience than to render evil for evil. It is not enough to practice the golden rule in this matter. The greater your position the more ready you ought to be to forgive another's crime.

Here, as usual in Erasmus, one finds no platitudes. The apparently simple suggestion that one can avoid evil by suffering it contains an arresting paradox. One can overcome evil by taking it upon oneself, whereas if one flies from it he is not certain to escape and may, even if he seems to escape, be overwhelmed. The only way truly to “overcome” an enemy is to help him become other than an enemy.⁴⁴

Thomas Merton

The hostile multitudes are vast as space –
What chance is there that all should be subdued?
Let but this angry mind be overthrown
And every foe is then and there destroyed.⁴⁵

Shantideva

- Think of a conflict or campaign in which you are involved. In the spirit of nonviolence, how might you eliminate the enemy?
- Think of an adversary. How might you regard this person as a treasured teacher, a dear relative, or an esteemed colleague in the working out of life?

Exploring Our Limits

Some situations are so hurtful or threatening, that we cannot imagine a nonviolent response. Even people who are committed to nonviolence, when pushed to their limits, sometimes feel that “I can be nonviolent, but only up to a point.” Or, “I can usually respond with love in difficult situations, but not in this situation.”

Responding to difficult situations nonviolently is not easy to do 100% of the time. Most of us have a threshold, and when we pass it, we find ourselves responding with fear, hatred, and possibly violence. Moreover, this threshold is not fixed. On good days, we may have more resilience and skill. On bad days, we may reach our threshold quickly.

An obstacle in the work of nonviolent social change is that, in our inner life, we rarely explore our threshold. It is uncomfortable to spend time and emotional energy investigating our limits.

Part of the ongoing work of satyagraha is to examine what we typically do when we start feeling that we have run out of options. By investigating this territory, we become better able to experiment with nonviolent approaches the next time we feel pushed to our limits.

For through violence you may murder a murderer,
but you can't murder murder.
Through violence you may murder a liar,
but you can't establish truth.
Through violence you may murder a hater,
but you can't murder hate through violence.
Darkness cannot put out darkness;
only light can do that.⁴⁶

Martin Luther King, Jr.

[Regarding rape . . .] Those of us who believe in nonviolence believe its potential for the prevention and de-escalation of violence is great. While we understand there is a risk to ourselves in our refusal to use counter-violence in an attack, we also know there is a risk to our safety no matter what action we choose to end an assault. We believe the methods of nonviolence have greater potential for the immediate and long term de-escalation of violence than any of the forms of counter-attack. We believe this will be especially true as we learn more about how nonviolence works and as we gain experience in the practice of nonviolence.⁴⁷

Mary Crane

- What are your personal hot buttons? Your triggers? Your limits? What circumstances cause you to wish others harm? What circumstances might move you to violence?
- When you reach your limit, what keeps you from experimenting with risks of kindness and compassion?
- If you want to extend your threshold, and reduce the number and types of triggers that enflame you, what practices might you try?

Sustaining Our Energy

The work of nonviolent social change is, in essence, the work of building and nurturing relationships. This work is slow and subtle. It does not attract popular interest and resources the way the business of violence does. Consequently, burnout in this field is a perennial threat. The chorus of scarcity is familiar: not enough time, not enough people, not enough money, not enough moral support.

How might we sustain ourselves in this work over time? Several practices of the inner life are reliable sources of strength and energy:

- Tend to your spiritual roots. Most religious traditions offer a variety of role models, resources, and practices which support the work of nonviolence. Find the ones that speak to you. All the great leaders of nonviolent social change have found nourishment at this well.
- Periodically go on retreat. Take regular time away from the demands of people, work, electronics, and busyness. A refreshed spirit is a gateway to the realm of nonviolent alternatives.
- Develop a meditation practice. Energy arises as we train the mind to be attentive and at ease.
- Review and fine-tune your guiding vision. Strength comes when we are able to state our purpose clearly and concisely. This is not a one-time task, but a periodic practice.
- Talk about the inner life with your colleagues, allies, and adversaries. It is easy to become parched when we keep our inner life hidden and protected. Some openness can bring refreshment.

When feelings of scarcity and burnout prevail, we fall into crisis mode: we act with less care for others, we avoid collaboration, we do lower quality work, and we forgo nourishment. By tending to the inner life, this crisis fades, and we find ways to work with quality, with care for our collaborators, and with a comfortable balance of diligence and ease.

In satyagraha, it is never the numbers that count; it is always the quality, more so when the forces of violence are uppermost.⁴⁸

Mohandas Gandhi

[T]here is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by nonviolent methods most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys his own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.⁴⁹

Thomas Merton

- When you feel burned out, or in crisis mode, how does the quality of your work and relationships change?
- How would you describe your spiritual tradition, especially in regard to ways of nonviolence? Do you turn to any particular resources, role models, or practices?
- What do you do (or what would you like to do) in order to maintain a refreshed spirit?

Undertaking Vows

In many traditions of nonviolence, vows are used as tools for social change. By voluntarily committing to practice certain actions which support nonviolence, and to avoid certain actions which undermine it, we undertake the work of satyagraha in everyday life.

If vows are to have genuine power, they cannot be determined by others. Vows are personal commitments that arise from an inner vision. Nonetheless, templates exist that generations of practitioners have found helpful.

For example, in the Buddhist tradition, a life of nonviolence is rooted in ethical conduct based on five precepts. These precepts are found, in some form, in most spiritual traditions, and Gandhi explored the Hindu version in depth as part of his practice of satyagraha. In their raw form, they will be familiar: do not kill, do not steal, do not engage in sexual misconduct, do not lie, do not use intoxicants.

If a vow is too blunt, though, it will provoke us to sly interpretations. Our challenge is to define the vows we take with some nuance, so that they serve as bold and meaningful supports for our practice.

In this spirit, Buddhist monk Thich Naht Hanh has prepared a contemporary and accessible rendering of the five precepts. The excerpts here provide an example of how we might craft our personal vows so that they are not moralistic burdens, but sources of strength in our work for nonviolent social change.

The taking of a vow does not mean that we are able to observe it completely from the very beginning; it does mean constant and honest effort in thought, word and deed with a view to its fulfillment.⁵⁰

Mohandas Gandhi

Five Mindfulness Trainings

- Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. . . .
- Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to practicing generosity in my thinking, speaking, and acting. . . .
- Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. . . .
- Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and compassionate listening in order to relieve suffering and to promote reconciliation and peace in myself and among other people, ethnic and religious groups, and nations. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am committed to speaking truthfully using words that inspire confidence, joy, and hope. . . .
- Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. . . .⁵¹

Thich Nhat Hanh

- What is one habit that undermines your practice of nonviolence? How might you craft a vow that would help you face this challenge?
- What is one aspect of nonviolence that you would like to integrate into your life better? How might you craft a vow that would support your growth in this area?

Notes

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