

from
NONVIOLENCE
1922

Mohandas K. Gandhi

Around 1920, Mohandas K. Gandhi emerged as a leader of India's independence movement. Gandhi had no desire to engage in an armed struggle with the British rulers of India. Instead, he persuaded his people to stage nonviolent protests. Although the struggle took years, Gandhi's policy of nonviolence and noncooperation eventually won independence for India. In the following essay, he explains his philosophy.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Clarifying

What did Gandhi mean when he said, "The hardest fiber must melt in the fire of love"?

When a person claims to be non-violent, he is expected not to be angry with one who has injured him. He will not wish him harm; he will wish him well; he will not swear at him; he will not cause him any physical hurt. He will put up with all the injury to which he is subjected by the wrong-doer. Thus Non-violence is complete innocence. Complete non-violence is complete absence of ill-will against all that lives. It therefore embraces even sub-human life, not excluding noxious insects or beasts. They have not been created to feed our destructive propensities.¹ If we only knew the mind of the Creator, we should find their proper place in His creation. Non-violence is therefore in its active form good-will towards all life. It is pure Love. I read it in the Hindu Scriptures, in the Bible, in the Koran.

Non-violence is a perfect state. It is a goal towards which all mankind moves naturally though unconsciously. Man does not become divine when he personifies innocence in himself. Only then does he become truly man. In our present state, we are partly men and partly beasts and in our ignorance and even arrogance say that we truly fulfill the purpose of our species, when we deliver blow for blow and develop the measure of anger required for the purpose. We pretend to believe that retaliation is the law of our being, whereas in every scripture we find that retaliation is nowhere obligatory but only permissible. It is restraint that is obligatory. Retaliation is indulgence requiring elaborate regulating. Restraint is the law of our being. For highest perfection is unattainable without highest restraint. Suffering is thus the badge of the human tribe.

The goal ever recedes from us. The greater the progress, the greater the recognition of our unworthiness. Satisfaction lies in the effort, not in the attainment. Full effort is full victory.

1. **propensities:** inclinations

Therefore though I realize more than ever how far I am from that goal, for me the Law of complete Love is the law of my being. Each time I fail, my effort shall be all the more determined for my failure. . . .

Let no one blame the unbending English nature. The hardest fiber must melt in the fire of love. I cannot be dislodged from that position because I know it. When British or other nature does not respond, the fire is not strong enough, if it is there at all.

Our non-violence need not be of the strong, but it *has* to be of the truthful. We must not intend harm to the English or to our cooperating countrymen, if and whilst we claim to be non-violent. But the majority of us *have* intended harm, and we have refrained from doing it because of our weakness or under the ignorant belief that mere refraining from physical hurt amounted to a due fulfillment of our pledge. Our pledge of non-violence excludes the possibility of future retaliation. Some of us seem unfortunately to have merely postponed the date of revenge.

Let me not be misunderstood. I do not say that the policy of non-violence excludes the possibility of revenge when the policy is abandoned. But it does most emphatically exclude the possibility of future revenge after a successful termination of the struggle. Therefore, whilst we are pursuing the policy of non-violence, we are bound to be actively friendly to English administrators and their cooperators. I felt ashamed when I was told that in some parts of India it was not safe for Englishmen or well-known cooperators to move about safely. The disgraceful scenes that took place at a recent Madras meeting were a complete denial of non-violence. Those who howled down the Chairman because he was supposed to have insulted me, disgraced themselves and their policy. They wounded the heart of their friend and helper, Mr. Andrews. They injured their own cause. If the Chairman believed that I was a scoundrel, he had a perfect right to say so. Ignorance is no provocation. But a Non-cooperator is pledged to put up with the gravest provocation. Provocation there would be, when I act scoundrel-like. I grant that it will be enough to absolve every Non-cooperator from the pledge of Non-violence and that any Non-cooperator will be fully justified in taking my life for misleading him. . . .

If the present workers do not believe in the probability of achieving such comparatively non-violent atmosphere, they should drop the non-violent program and frame another which is wholly different in character. If we approach our program with the mental reservation that after all we shall wrest the power from the British by force of arms, then we are untrue to our profession of Non-violence. If we believe in our program, we are bound to believe that the British people are not unamenable to the force of affection, as they are undoubtedly amenable to force of arms. For the unbelievers, the Councils are undoubtedly the school of learning with their heavy program of humiliations spread over a few generations or a rapid but bloody revolution probably never witnessed before in the world. I have

no desire to take part in such a revolution. I will not be a willing instrument for promoting it. The choice, in my opinion, lies between honest Non-violence with Non-cooperation as its necessary corollary,² or reversion to responsive cooperation, i.e., cooperation *cum*³ obstruction.

Source: Excerpt from “Non-Violence,” from *Young India, 1919–1922* by Mahatma Gandhi (Triplicane, Madras: S. Ganesan, 1922), pp. 285–297.

2. **corollary:** addition
3. *cum:* with

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

Gandhi believed that his policy of nonviolence and love would eventually “melt” the British. He believed that the most resistant opponent eventually could be persuaded to see justice.