

Six Principles of Nonviolence

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Since the days of Gandhi and King, the world has seen a dramatic upsurge in nonviolent resistance. Scholars have recently been able to show that nonviolence is twice as effective as violence in dislodging unjust regimes – and usually three times as fast. Nonviolence can be a safe, effective, and *lasting* way to defeat injustice; but like any other science, it takes some knowledge as well as courage and determination. Successful nonviolent campaigners, like those in the student-led “Otpor” movement in Serbia, have found new ways to share what they have learned, but many people still find themselves in a nonviolent movement without having had the chance to study it. Here are some general guidelines that can help you carry out nonviolent action more safely and effectively, while drawing upon nonviolent practices from your own cultural heritage. They derive, as you’ll see, from two basic guidelines that we can bear in mind always:

- We are not against other people, only what they are doing.
- Means are ends in the making; nothing good can finally result from violence.

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You are not alone in your struggle for a better world!

1. Respect everyone – including yourself. The more we respect others, the more effectively we can persuade them to change. Never use humiliation as a tool — or accept humiliation from others; that degrades everyone. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (MLK, Jr.). Remember, nobody can degrade you without your permission.

The real success in nonviolence, which violence can never achieve, is to heal relationships. Even in a case of extreme violence, Gandhi felt it was possible to hate the sin, not the sinner. In 1942, when India, held down by the British, feared a Japanese invasion, he advised his countrymen:

If we were a free country, things could be done nonviolently to prevent the Japanese from entering the country. As it is, nonviolent resistance could commence the moment the Japanese affect a landing. Thus, nonviolent resisters would refuse them any help, even water. For it is no part of their duty to help anyone to steal their country. But if a Japanese had missed his way and was dying of thirst and sought help as a human being, a nonviolent resister, who may not regard anyone as his enemy, would give water to the thirsty one. Suppose the Japanese compel resisters to give them water, the resisters must die in the act of resistance.

2. Always include ‘Constructive Programme’. Concrete action is always more powerful than mere symbolism, especially when that concrete action is constructive: setting up schools, cottage industries, cooperative farms, etc. Gandhi started eighteen projects that enabled Indians to take charge of their own society, making it much easier to ‘dismiss’ British rule – *and* lay the groundwork for their own democracy. Constructive work has many advantages:

- It enables people to *break* their *dependency* on a regime, by creating their own goods and services. You cannot get rid of an oppressor when you’re depending on him for something essential.

- It's *proactive*; you are not just reacting to offenses but taking charge. This helps you shed passivity, fear, and helplessness.
- It gives a movement *continuity*, as it can continue when direct resistance is not advisable.
- It builds *community*. Studies have shown that working together is the most effective way to unite people. CP also reassures the general public that your movement is not a danger to the social order.

And, most importantly,

- CP builds the *infrastructure* that will be needed when the oppressive regime falls. Many an insurrection has succeeded only to find a new set of oppressors rush into the vacuum.

So a good guideline to follow is:

Be constructive wherever possible, obstructive wherever necessary.

3. Be aware of the long term. Nonviolent action always has positive results, sometimes more than we intended. In the 1950s, when China was passing through a severe famine, the United States branch of Fellowship of Reconciliation organized a mail-in campaign to get President Eisenhower to send surplus food to China. Some 35,000 Americans took part. Our message to the President was a simple inscription from Isaiah: "If thine enemy hunger, feed him." There was no response – apparently. But twenty-five years later we learned that we had averted a proposal to bomb targets in Mainland China during the Korean War! At a key meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff the President announced, "Gentlemen, since 35,000 Americans want us to feed the Chinese, this is hardly the time to start bombing them!"

Violence sometimes "works," that is, forces a particular change, but in the long run leads to more misery and disorder. We do not have control over the final results of our actions, but we can have control over the *means* we use, including even our feelings and the state of our mind. Remember this handy formula:

*Violence sometimes "works" but it never works (i.e., makes things or relationships better).
Nonviolence sometimes "works" and always works.*

Have clear goals. Cling to essentials (like human dignity), be clear about your principles, but be ready to change tactics or compromise on anything else. Remember, you are not in a power struggle (though the opponent may think that way): you are in a struggle for justice, and human dignity.

In nonviolence, you can lose all the battles but still go on to win the war!

4. Look for "win/win" solutions that will satisfy the real needs of all parties. Remember that you are trying to rebuild relationships, if at all possible, not score "victories." In a conflict, we can feel that in order for one side to win, the other has to lose; but this is not true. Therefore, in nonviolence we do not seek to be winners, or rise over others; we seek to learn and to make things better for all.

During intense negotiations over the Montgomery, Alabama segregation laws, Martin Luther King, Jr. made an interesting observation that he relates in *Stride Toward Freedom*. An attorney for the

city bus company who had obstructed the African-American people's demands for desegregation revealed the real source of his objection: "If we granted the Negroes these demands they would go about boasting of a victory that they had won over the white people; and this we will not stand for."

Reflecting on this, King advised the participants in the movement not to gloat or boast, reminding them: "Through nonviolence we avoid the temptation of taking on the psychology of victors." The "psychology of victors" belongs to the age-old dynamic of me-against-you, but the nonviolent person sees life as a "co-evolution" toward loving community in which all can thrive. Gloating over our "victories" can actually undo our hard-won gains.

5. Use Power Carefully. We are conditioned (especially in the West) to think that power "grows out of the barrel of a gun." There is indeed a kind of power that comes from threats and brute force – but it is powerless if we refuse to comply with them. There is another kind of power that comes from truth. Let us say that you have been petitioning to have an injustice removed; perhaps you have made your feelings known in polite but firm protest actions, but the other party is not responding. Then you must, as Gandhi said, "not only speak to the head but move the heart also." And this we can do by taking upon ourselves, to make it clear, the suffering inherent in the unjust system. This is known as Satyagraha, or 'truth force.' In extreme cases we may have to do it at the risk of our life (which is why it is good to be very clear about our goals!). Do this with care. History, and often our own experience, has shown that even bitter hostilities can melt with this kind of persuasion that seeks to open the eyes of the opponent rather than coerce him or her. Nonetheless, there are times when we must use forms of coercion, for example, when a dictator refuses to step down, and we have to act immediately to end the vast amounts of human suffering that is caused by that person misusing power. Even then, it requires strategic thinking and nonviolent care to do it right. But when time *does* allow we use the power of *patience* and *persuasion*, of enduring rather than inflicting suffering. The changes brought about by persuasion are lasting: one who is persuaded stays persuaded, while someone who is coerced will be just waiting for the chance for revenge.

6. Claim our Legacy. Nonviolence no longer needs to take place in a vacuum. To know the history of the many nonviolent movements we referred to at the beginning, and be in touch with others involved in similar efforts today, can be very helpful (see our website for resources). Always be aware, at any rate, that if you are using nonviolence with courage, determination, and a clear strategy, you will do more than probably succeed: win or lose, you will be playing your part in a great transformation of human relationships that our future depends on.

These six principles are founded on a belief that all life is an interconnected whole and that when we understand our real needs we are not in competition with anyone. In fact, as Martin Luther King said, "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."