

# Gandhi's use of nonviolence was a "guiding light" for Martin Luther King Jr.

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American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta, both wearing garlands, are received by admirers after landing at the airport in New Delhi, India, in 1959. Photo by: AP Photo/R. Satakopan

Mahatma Gandhi was an activist and civil rights leader. He helped lead the Indian independence movement, organizing boycotts and peaceful protests against British rule. Gandhi inspired people all over the world, including Martin Luther King Jr., one of the most famous civil rights leaders in the United States.

Though the two men never got a chance to meet (King was 19 when Gandhi died), King learned about Gandhi through his writing and a trip to India in 1959. King drew heavily on the Gandhian principle of nonviolence in his own civil rights activism. He wrote that "while the Montgomery boycott was going on, India's Gandhi was the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change."

## Principle Of Nonviolence Rooted In Love

"Nonviolence" is more than simply agreeing that you won't physically attack your enemy. Gandhi referred to his form of nonviolence as satyagraha, meaning "truth-force" or "love-force." Practicing satyagraha means a person should seek truth and love while refusing, through nonviolent resistance, to participate in something he or she believes is wrong. This principle guided Gandhi's activism against the British Empire, helping India win its freedom in 1947.

King first learned of Gandhi's concept of nonviolence when he was studying to become a minister. As a Christian, he connected the Hindu thinker's words to the Biblical appeal of Jesus to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

King recognized "the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence." For the first time, he later wrote, he saw that nonviolence was "one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom."

## Nonviolence As A Way To Achieve Justice

King was already familiar with peaceful civil disobedience through American writers like Henry David Thoreau. He liked Gandhi's idea that oppressed people could use truth or love as weapons in their struggle for justice. However, he didn't find a practical application for it until he became involved in the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956. At that time, the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, was segregated, and African-Americans were forced to ride at the back of the bus. King and other activists organized a boycott, and for over a year, African-Americans across the city refused to ride on Montgomery buses.

In his 1958 book "Stride Toward Freedom," King laid out the principles of nonviolence he'd used during the boycott. He affirmed that it is possible to resist evil without resorting to violence and to oppose evil itself without opposing the people committing evil. King also wrote that people who practice nonviolence must be willing to suffer without retaliation, internal or external: "The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him."

"He saw [nonviolence] as an expression of love for all people," says Clayborne Carson, a history professor and director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University in California. "It's a way of reaching people and convincing them of the rightness of your cause."

In 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that Montgomery's bus segregation was unconstitutional. Shortly afterward, King told a crowd in Brooklyn that "Christ showed us the way, and Gandhi in India showed it could work."

King wasn't the only civil rights leader who looked to Gandhi for inspiration. In the late 1950s, future congressman John Lewis studied Gandhi in nonviolence workshops led by activist James Lawson. These workshops prepared Lewis for the sit-ins he and other students would later hold at lunch counters in Nashville, Tennessee.

It is important to "understand and feel ... that your attacker is as much a victim as you are, that he is a victim of the forces that have shaped and fed his anger and fury," Lewis wrote in his book "Walking with the Wind." If you can do that, "you are well on your way to the nonviolent life."

### **King Instrumental In Spreading Gandhi's Message**

To better understand Gandhian principles, King took a one-month trip to India at the beginning of 1959. There, he was pleasantly surprised to find that many people there had followed the nonviolent bus boycott he had helped organize. During the trip, King met with Gandhi's son, cousin, grandsons and other relatives and laid a wreath on his entombed ashes. King left India even more convinced of the power of nonviolent civil disobedience to affect social change.

"It was a marvelous thing to see the amazing results of a nonviolent campaign," King wrote after his trip. "The aftermath of hatred and bitterness that usually follows a violent campaign was found nowhere in India. Today, a mutual friendship based on complete equality exists between the Indian and British people within the commonwealth."

"I would say that after he returned, he was the most prominent living advocate for nonviolence," Carson says. "He popularized a lot of the ideas that Gandhi had, but through King, they spread throughout the United States and, of course, came to other parts of the world."

**Quiz**

1 Which statement would Martin Luther King Jr. MOST LIKELY agree with? Which selection from the article supports your answer?

- 1. The principle of nonviolence requires activists to see their attackers and oppressors as humans worthy of love.*
- 2. It is necessary for those who want to practice nonviolent protest to study Gandhi's teachings by visiting India.*

- (A) Option 1; For the first time, he later wrote, he saw that nonviolence was "one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom."
- (B ) Option 1; King also wrote that people who practice nonviolence must be willing to suffer without retaliation, internal or external: "The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him."
- (C) Option 2; To better understand Gandhian principles, King took a one-month trip to India at the beginning of 1959. There, he was pleasantly surprised to find that many people there had followed the nonviolent bus boycott he had helped organize.
- (D) Option 2; "The aftermath of hatred and bitterness that usually follows a violent campaign was found nowhere in India. Today, a mutual friendship based on complete equality exists between the Indian and British people within the commonwealth."

- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Nonviolence As A Way To Achieve Justice."

*King wasn't the only civil rights leader who looked to Gandhi for inspiration. In the late 1950s, future congressman John Lewis studied Gandhi in nonviolence workshops led by activist James Lawson. These workshops prepared Lewis for the sit-ins he and other students would later hold at lunch counters in Nashville, Tennessee.*

Which idea is BEST supported by this paragraph?

- (A) Many activists during the civil rights movement recognized and wanted to use the power of nonviolent protest.
  - (B) John Lewis knew that protesting during the civil rights movement would help him become a congressman.
  - (C) James Lawson was one of the leading teachers of nonviolent protest even though many have forgotten him.
  - (D) King visited Lewis and other students at the lunch counter sit-ins to provide further support for their activism.
- 3 What is the relationship between the introduction [paragraphs 1-2] and the concluding section, "King Instrumental In Spreading Gandhi's Message"?
- (A) Both sections describe the way that King's perceptions of nonviolent protest changed over time.
  - (B) Both sections compare the situation of the people in India before and after the end of British rule.
  - (C) Both sections illustrate the impact of religion on both Gandhi and King, then show what caused this.
  - (D) Both sections emphasize Gandhi's role in inspiring King, then King's role in spreading Gandhi's message.

- 4 Read the sentences from the section "Nonviolence As A Way To Achieve Justice."

*At that time, the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, was segregated, and African-Americans were forced to ride at the back of the bus.*

*In 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that Montgomery's bus segregation was unconstitutional.*

Which option BEST describes how the sentences help develop a central idea of the article?

- (A) They illustrate a change over time in the way people around the world viewed Gandhi's message.
- (B) They illustrate a contrast between perceptions of nonviolence before and after King's use of it.
- (C) They present a cause and an effect of King's use of nonviolent protest to indicate its effectiveness.
- (D) They present a problem and a solution encountered by the Supreme Court during the 1950s.

