

A Brief Introduction to the History of Non-Violence

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Non-Violence is a way of a living. A non-violent person strives to do no harm or hurt to others, and to not take other peoples things, but rather share with others. A non-violent person believes in being good to others, and so achieves happiness for all. This is very difficult. It involves self-understanding, self-mastery and self-discipline. A non-violent person needs to conquer himself (herself) and achieve self-control in mind and body.

Ahimsa and tolerance are two main anchors of non-violence. Ahimsa means non-violence, and it holds that all living things are equal. Since all things are equal, a non-violent person respects life in all its forms and shapes. Tolerance guarantees multiplicity of views. Tolerance implies acceptance, brotherhood love and equality. This tolerance permeates all activities in life, gives equal rights to women and men, and breaks down the division that exists in class and caste. Therefore non-violence removes the need for paternalistic and hierarchical systems, and this can lead to peace and tranquility among people and nations. (1)

Around 500 B.C.E. two important leaders promulgated non-violence. They were Mahavira, the founder of Jainism and Gautama Siddhartha the Buddha, who founded Buddhism. At about the same time in history, Confucius and Lau-Tse in China, the Hebrew prophets in the Mid-east, Socrates and Plato in Greece and Zoroaster in Persia all started the study of human relations as we know it.

The Jains practice Ahimsa (non-violence), tolerance and equality. The Buddhist proclaims the Four Noble Truths, which are:

1. There is suffering.
2. There is a cause to suffering.
3. Suffering is cause by Desire.
4. Desire can be extinguished by the Eight fold Path which are:
 - i) Right view
 - ii) Right resolution
 - iii) Right speech
 - iv) Right action
 - v) Right livelihood
 - vi) Right mindfulness
 - vii) Right concentration
 - viii) Right reasoning.

When desire has been extinguished and meditation, self-discipline, love and compassion take its place, nirvana can be achieved. (2)

At the height of the Roman Empire, Jesus of Nazareth preached love and compassion for all living things. Love and compassion calls for a non-violent life style. He said you should love god with all your soul, with all your heart, and with all your might and love your neighbor as yourself.

Around 500 A.D. Mohamed arose as a prophet in Arabia and exhorted his followers to treat each other with equality, strive to conquer their own evil habits, and submit to the will of Allah.

All these peaceful philosophies teach reverence for all living things and compassion towards one another. They all stress truth, non-violence tolerance and love. Throughout history many non-violent movements have resolved conflicts peacefully and restored justice and tranquility to the contending parties.

In ancient Rome the plebians (common people) were sometimes dissatisfied with their consuls (rulers). Such an incident occurred in 494 B.C.E. The people retired to a hill overlooking the city called the Sacred Mount and refused to work for the government. The plebians remained there for several days until the consuls agreed to their demands for improvement in their wages and working conditions. In 258 B.C.E. another similar conflict was reported. The Senate refused a Roman army reforms. Instead of resorting to military action the army retreated to the Sacred Mount near the city and threatened to found a separate new city. The Roman Senate relented and acceded to the soldiers' demands. (3)

During the Roman occupation of Jerusalem, some Jewish rabbis organized non-violent resistance to Rome and won concessions which helped their survival and the survival of their culture. The Essenes, an early Christian Sect, and other early Christian groups also practiced non-violence in their struggle against the Romans. After the Emperor Constantine, (322 A.D.) embraced Christianity and used violence as a government policy non-violent Christians founded thousands of monasteries and other refuge to preserve their beliefs and way of life. This continued throughout the middle ages.

After the Crusades, St. Francis of Assisi organized non-violent and peaceful communities, which resolved conflicts between the aristocratic rulers and the poor peasants of Italy, and in 1233 A.D. it culminated in the peaceful settlement of a bloody civil war. (3)

From the beginning many groups in America practiced non-violence. The Quakers were among the first. William Penn dealt justly with the Delaware Indians, and did not war with them. John Woolman appealed to his fellow Americans to give up slavery and to treat the native people as friends. (4)

The abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass opposed slavery and adopted non-violence. Adin Ballou wrote extensively about non-violent resistance to warfare. David Henry Thoreau lived a simple peaceful life and wrote about it and about civil disobedience to a warlike government in his book “Walden Pond”. William James’ book “The Moral Equivalent of War” was important because it laid out the case for non-violence in America.

Before and during World War I, the Suffragettes, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Jane Addams and others objected to the war, to slavery and to the disenfranchisement of women. They behaved non-violently even when they were jailed.

Workers who joined trade unions engaged many times in non-violent marches and sit down strikes to pressure their employers to give them fair wages and better working conditions. They eventually were successful but paid in pain suffering and even death for their success.

In the years before World War II, Richard Gregg wrote “The Power of Non-violence”. He and Donald Benedict and other conscientious objectors to war pledged not to fight or help with war, to refuse payment of taxes for war and to endure hardship, even imprisonment. They behaved non-violently and objected to the war because they said that war was caused by the separation of man from man and man from god. A. J. Muste was a strong advocate for non-violence, peace and reconciliation. In his writing “Of Holy Disobedience” he justified his opposition to war and he inspired the committee for Non-violent Action to work peace and justice. (4)

During the 1960’s and 1970’s millions of people opposed the killing and suffering that took place in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. It is due to their many peaceful non-violent protest and marches in the streets of America that much credit goes for the end of that conflagration. Many leaders in politics, religion and academia joined ordinary citizens and students in non-violent action and non-co-operation to the government’s conduct of that war.

The greatest practitioner of non-violence in America was Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He started as the spokesman for the negro bus boycott in December 1955, in the city of Montgomery, Alabama, and success of that year long non-violent struggle of the African Americans of Alabama propelled him into the leadership of the civil rights movement in America. In 1929 the year of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birth, Mahatma Gandhi predicted that a black man would teach the western world the principles and methods of non-violence. He wrote “Perhaps it will be through the Negro that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered”. (Bennett P.3-4) (5)

From 1955 to the year of his assassination 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. led non-violent protests, sit-ins, and jail residence to gain equal rights for African Americans in this country. The Congress and the Supreme Court of the United States made voting rights and integration of Negroes into all walks of life into law.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) was an important practitioner of the art of non-violence. His non-violence was not pacifism, but active resistance to injustice and to unjust laws. He called his program satyagraha - the strength of truth (love). The principles of satyagraha are (1) non-violence towards the oppressor no matter what the provocation. (2) Separate the person who is beating you from the reason why he is doing it. (3) Love and forgiveness towards the oppressor. (4) No intent to humiliate or harm him but rather aim to convert him to your cause. (5) Be willing to endure punishment for your belief even if you have to die for it. (Ashe P.88-101) (6)

Martin Luther King Jr. explained Gandhi's philosophy in more detail. It is not passive resistance but active physical non-violent action and non-co-operation, which demand great courage. It takes discipline and a strong belief in your cause to not hit back when someone is beating you. It does not seek to humiliate or harm the oppressor but rather to win his friendship and understanding. It separates the person of the oppressor from the act of his oppression. It asks for submission to suffering even unto death. It demands self-knowledge and a spiritual conversion from hatred and retribution to love and forgiveness. (4)

This year 2003 saw a worldwide non-violent protest against the war in Iraq. Although this movement was not successful in stopping the war, it called attention to the strength of non-violence. Each village, town and city can form communities of peace and non-violence. Since in democratic countries the people vote for their leaders, it is clear that leaders can be selected who represent the non-violence of its constituents. The people can co-operate with peaceful governments and withhold co-operation from warlike ones. Governments cannot operate or declare war without the consent of its citizens. Therefore we the people must change our lives to truly reflect non-violence if we want to live in the world of peace and happiness. (3)

Total non-violence is not just non-violence between human beings and other living things and each other. It also involves kind treatments towards planet earth. Mankind cannot continue to rape and pillage our environment. We need to stop polluting our oceans, rivers, air and land. (3) (P.204-206)

According to Elise Boulding "There is no specific genetic programming for either nurturant or aggressive behaviors, the actual patterns are the result of social learning". (P.4) (3) Margaret Mead has also written, "That war is a social invention, not a biological necessity". (P.27) (3) So it depends greatly on what we teach our young people in our schools. Society can change to be non-violent and peaceful. So can our world.

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