

Mahatma Gandhi

Soul-Force

Gandhi concluded that, since the two methods of fighting against injustice were inadequate or deeply flawed, we needed a new method. It should activate the soul, mobilize the individual's latent moral energies, appeal to both the head and the heart, and create a climate conducive to peaceful resolution of conflict conducted in a spirit of mutual goodwill. Gandhi thought that his method of satyāgraha met this requirement. He first discovered and tried it out during his campaigns against racial discrimination in South Africa, and kept perfecting it in the course of his struggles against British rule in India and the unjust practices of his own society.

For Gandhi satyagraha, meaning civil insistence on or tenacity in the pursuit of truth, aimed to penetrate the barriers of prejudice, ill-will, dogmatism, self-righteousness, and selfishness, and to reach out to and activate the soul of the opponent. However degenerate or dogmatic a human being might be, he had a soul, and hence the capacity to feel for other human beings and acknowledge their common humanity. Even a Hitler or Mussolini was not beyond redemption. They too loved their parents, wives, children, friends, and pet animals, thereby displaying the basic human capacity for fellow-feeling. Their problem was not that they lacked that capacity but rather that it was limited to a few, and our task was to find ways of expanding it. Satyagraha was a 'surgery of the soul', a way of activating 'soul-force'. For Gandhi 'suffering love' was the best way to do this, and formed the inspiring principle of his new method. As he put it: "I have come to this fundamental conclusion that if you want something really important to be done, you must not merely satisfy the reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of reason is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart

comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man. Suffering is the badge of the human race, not the sword”.

Confronted with an injustice, the satya[̄]grahi sought a dialogue with his opponent. He did not confront the latter with a dogmatic insistence on the justice of his demands. He knew he could be partial and biased, and invited his opponent to join him in cooperatively searching for the ‘truth’ or the most just course of action concerning the matter in dispute. As Gandhi put it, ‘I am essentially a man of compromise because I am never sure that I am right.’ When the dialogue was denied or reduced to an insincere exercise in public relations, the satya[̄]grahi took a principled stand on what he sincerely believed to be his just demands, and patiently and uncomplainingly suffered whatever violence was done to him. His opponent saw him as an enemy or a troublemaker. He refused to reciprocate, and saw him instead as a fellow human being whose temporarily eclipsed sense of humanity it was his duty to restore. Since his sole concern was to evoke a moral response in his opponent, he did everything possible to put him at ease and nothing to harass, embarrass, anger, or frighten him, hoping thereby to trigger in him a slow, intensely personal, and highly complex process of self-examination. The moment his opponent showed willingness to talk in a spirit of genuine goodwill, he suspended the struggle and gave reason a chance to work in a more hospitable climate.

Like Kant and John Rawls, Gandhi argued that every community required a widespread sense of justice to hold it together. But unlike them he argued that the sense of justice was highly cerebral and needed a deeper and emotionally charged sense of shared humanity to give it depth and energy. The sense of humanity consisted in the recognition of the fundamental ontological fact that human well-being was indivisible, that in degrading and brutalizing others human beings degraded and brutalized themselves, and that they could not

sustain a shared collective life without a spirit of mutual concern. The sense of humanity constituted the community's vital moral capital, without which it had no defences against or resources to fight the forces of injustice, exploitation, and oppression. The slow and painful task of cultivating and consolidating the sense of humanity, and thereby laying the foundations of a truly moral community, was a collective responsibility, which the satya⁻grahi took it upon himself to discharge. He assumed the burden of the common evil, sought to liberate both himself and his opponent from its tyrannical automatism, and helped reduce the prevailing level of inhumanity. As Gandhi put it, the old sages 'returned good for evil and killed it'. The satya⁻grahi took his stand on this 'fundamental moral truth'.

In all his satya⁻grahas Gandhi observed certain basic principles. They were preceded by a careful study of the situation, patient gathering of facts, a reasoned defence of the objectives, a popular agitation to convince the opponent of the intensity of the satya⁻grahi's feeling, and an ultimatum to give him a last chance for negotiation. Throughout the satya⁻graha, the channels of communication with the opponent were kept open, the attitudes on either side were not allowed to harden, and intermediaries were encouraged. The satya⁻grahi was required to take a pledge not to use violence or to resist arrest or confiscation of his property. Similar rules were laid down for the satya⁻grahi prisoner, who was expected to be courteous, to ask for no special privileges, to do as he was ordered, and never to agitate for conveniences 'whose deprivation does not involve any injury to his self-respect'.

Gandhi explained the effectiveness of satya⁻graha in terms of the spiritual impact of suffering love. The satya⁻grahi's love of his opponent and moral nobility disarmed the latter, defused his feelings of anger and hatred, and mobilized his higher nature. And his uncomplaining suffering denied his opponent the pleasure of victory, mobilized neutral public opinion, and created in him a mood conducive to calm introspection. The two together

triggered the complex process of critical self-examination on which a satya[̄]graha relied for its ultimate success. Love by itself was not enough, as otherwise the satya[̄]grahi could quietly expostulate with his opponent without launching a campaign, nor was suffering by itself enough, for it had no value and was even counterproductive if accompanied by hatred and anger. Love spiritualized suffering, which in itself had only a psychological value; suffering gave love its psychological energy and moral power. In Gandhi's view, we knew so little about the operations of the human soul that it was not easy to explain rationally how non-violence worked. 'In violence there is nothing invisible. Non-violence, on the other hand, is three-fourths invisible', and it acted in such a 'silent and undemonstrative' manner that its working always retained an air of mystery.

Although Gandhi continued to maintain that suffering love was omnipotent and, when pure, capable of 'melting even the stoniest hearts', he knew that reality was quite different. Most satya[̄]grahis were ordinary human beings whose tolerance, love, determination, and ability to suffer had obvious limits, and their opponents were sometimes too prejudiced and callous to be swayed by their suffering. Not surprisingly, Gandhi was led to introduce such other forms of pressure as economic boycott, non-payment of taxes, non-cooperation, and hartā[̄] (cessation of work), none of which relied on the spiritual power of suffering love alone. His vocabulary too became increasingly aggressive. He began to talk of 'non-violent warfare', 'peaceful rebellion', a 'civilized form of warfare', a 'war bereft of every trace of violence', and 'weapons' in the 'armoury' of the satya[̄]grahi, all intended to 'compel' and 'force' the opponent to negotiate. As was to be expected, Gandhi's political realism triumphed over his moral idealism, and, despite his claims to the contrary, his satya[̄]grahas were not always purely spiritual in nature.

In addition to these and other methods, Gandhi introduced the highly controversial method of fasting. He knew that his fasts caused considerable unease among his critics and followers, and went to great lengths to defend them. He argued that his fast was a form of suffering love and had a fourfold purpose. First, it was his way of expressing his deep sense of sorrow and hurt at the way in which those he loved had degraded themselves and disappointed him. Second, as their leader he felt responsible for them, and his fast was his way of atoning for their misdeeds. Third, it was his last desperate attempt, an 'intense spiritual effort', to stir their 'sluggish conscience', to 'sting them into action', and to mobilize their moral energies. For a variety of reasons his countrymen had temporarily lost their senses, as in the case of communal violence, or become insensitive to injustice and suffering, as in the case of untouchability, or had shown utter lack of self-discipline, as when a satyagraha became violent. By suffering himself and inducing sympathetic suffering in them, he said he intended to persuade them to reassess their actions. Finally, the fast was intended to bring the quarrelling parties together and to get them to resolve their differences themselves, thereby both deepening their sense of community and developing their powers of self-determination and conflict-resolution.

Gandhi agreed that his fast exerted considerable pressure on his intended target, but thought it on balance fully justified. Evil had occurred and needed to be fought. Moral appeals had failed. He could therefore either acquiesce in the evil, which was immoral, or use the only means available to a man of non-violence. The fast did exert moral pressure, but there was nothing improper in it. And it was not coercion or blackmail because it did not threaten others with personal harm. Obviously they did not want him to die, but that was because they loved him, and there was nothing immoral in appealing to their love in this way, especially when its purpose was to make them better human beings.

Since the fast could easily be misused for selfish purposes and even degenerate into blackmail, Gandhi imposed strict limits on it. First, it could only be undertaken against those with whom one was bound by the ties of love and never against strangers, which was why his fasts were directed against his countrymen and rarely against the colonial government. Secondly, the fast must have a concrete and clearly specified purpose, which its addressee can easily understand and respond to. Thirdly, the purpose must be morally defensible especially in the eyes of its intended target. Fourthly, it should not in any way be designed to serve one's personal interests. Fifthly, it should not ask people to do what they are incapable of doing, or involve great sacrifices. And finally, it should only be undertaken by one who is an acknowledged moral leader of his people, has a long record of working for their welfare, and an unblemished moral character.

Will discuss the limits of Satyagrah tomorrow.

(Source: Bhikhu Parekh *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*)