

Marching with Gandhi

Remembering His Message of Love and Truth



Gandhi wanted to create positive change in ways that embraced concepts of ahimsa. His solution came in the form of a nonviolent protest movement he called “Satyagraha.” For Gandhi, Satyagraha meant, “truth force,” which to him was synonymous with, “God force,” or “a firmness for truth and love.” **BY ELLEN MAHONEY**

LAST JANUARY, I marched with an estimated 100,000 women, men, young adults, and children on a chilly and sunny morning in Denver. I also marched with some two million people around the world from Washington D.C. to Los Angeles, from London to Sydney. And as I walked, I thought about Gandhi and his many marches in South Africa and India. I wondered what Gandhi would think of Earth now, with so many people peacefully walking together. I remembered Gandhi’s dedication to his key concepts of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, and wondered about their meaning and relevance today in our modern turbulent world.

Ahimsa Means Love

GANDHI WAS BORN IN 1869 in Porbandar, India, which is located on the northwest coast on the Arabian Sea. A Hindu, Gandhi was raised with the concept of ahimsa, which is a Sanskrit word loosely translated to mean, “to do no harm.” At its root, “himsa” means, “harm,” and the “a” prefix negates this. But there’s more to this high-vibration, powerful word. Ahimsa is similar to forgiveness and empathy; it is an ideal to strive for or to uncover within.

A core tenet of Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, ahimsa also means a loving kindness to all, including oneself, and an appreciation of the divine spark within all life. Behaviors that range from name-calling, mockery, bullying, and abuse, to the injury of or the



taking of human or animal life, belie this sacred term. On the other hand, divine concepts such as “treat others as you’d like to be treated,” and “love your neighbor,” are at the foundation of ahimsa.

Gandhi’s mother, Putlibai, taught him about ahimsa, which had an everlasting influence on his life. A devout woman, Putlibai followed Jainism, an ancient religion of India that advocates kindness, compassion, nonviolence, acceptance of other religions, vegetarianism, and fasting for purification. The youngest child of his family, Gandhi was especially close to his mother who regularly visited temple, maintained a strict vegetarian diet, and fasted during religious observances. In his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi described moments in his childhood where he recognized ahimsa. For example, he would go with his mother when she would attend to neighbors in need, which taught him about kindness and helping others. Gandhi also learned about ahimsa from his father, Karamchand, who was a leader in the community. Karamchand helped with household chores and enjoyed interacting with people of different faiths.

Practicing ahimsa wasn’t always easy. As a teenager, Gandhi wrestled with some of his family’s primary beliefs and defied them. In his autobiography

he admitted to smoking cigarettes, taking expensive items from his older brother, and eating meat. He also said he could be short tempered and set in his ways. But in time, Gandhi developed behaviors that were more in line with his upbringing and the person he wanted to be as a student, husband, father, lawyer, activist, and leader.

Years later, the concept of ahimsa played a vital role in helping Gandhi define and develop his method for nonviolent protest he called Satyagraha.

Gandhi’s Life-Changing World Travels

AFTER STUDYING LAW and passing the bar in England, Gandhi found steady work in South Africa as a lawyer. Living in these two countries that were far from India was a time

of great personal growth and awakening for him. In London, where he lived from 1888 to 1891, Gandhi realized that being himself—rather than trying to emulate a British gentleman—was best. In South Africa, where he lived from 1893 to 1914, Gandhi learned the importance of standing up for himself and others.

In South Africa, Gandhi worked hard to provide for his wife, Kasturba, and their growing family of four sons: Harilal, Manilal, Ramdas, and Devdas. He had success as a lawyer, but the ongoing disrespect, discrimination, and abuse he suffered under British and Dutch rule in South Africa was life changing. A judge told him to remove his turban in a Durban courtroom, which humiliated Gandhi. A policeman threw him off a train in Pietermaritzburg one winter night for refusing to take a lower-class seat when he had already purchased a first-class ticket.

After working for years in South Africa as a lawyer, Gandhi was attacked in the port of Durban by an angry mob that didn’t like his pro-Indian reform efforts. He agonized over how unjustly Indians were treated in South Africa and his law office focused on aiding his fellow Indians. A turning point for Gandhi came early on when an indentured Indian named Balasundaram sought help after his boss had beaten him and broken

his front teeth. Gandhi stood up for the man and helped him find a new employer and better work situation. News of Balasundaram's case spread through South Africa and Gandhi's law practice flourished. Over the following years, Gandhi fought against injustices such as unfair taxation, the enforcement of the restrictive Asiatic Registration Act (the "Black Act"), and the ever-present discrimination against Indians. And, during the 1899 Second Boer War, and the 1906 Zulu Rebellion in South Africa, Gandhi worked as an ambulance medic to help injured soldiers.

In time, Gandhi changed. The once shy, tongue-tied boy from Porbandar became a determined man who wanted to take action and right wrongs. He began to step up his work on behalf of Indians, but it took courage, perseverance, ingenuity, and preparation. Gandhi was an avid reader and had read Henry David Thoreau's essay, "Civil Disobedience," which gave him an important foundation for how individuals could incite change and help eradicate injustices through nonviolent measures such as labor strikes or marches. As a law school student in London, Gandhi learned firsthand about the 1888 Matchgirls' Strike and the 1889 London Dockers' Strike. He saw how the strikers' efforts helped increase low wages and improve bad work conditions.

Satyagraha—the "Truth Force" of Nonviolence

GANDHI WANTED TO CREATE positive change in ways that embraced concepts of ahimsa. His solution came in the form of a nonviolent protest movement he called "Satyagraha," a Sanskrit word derived from "*satya*" meaning "truth," and "*agraha*" meaning "insistence on" or "holding firmly to." For Gandhi, Satyagraha meant, "truth force," which to him was synonymous with, "God force," or "a firmness for truth and love." Individuals who wanted to peacefully resist unjust laws or inequality were called "Satyagrahis."

Gandhi first demonstrated his Satyagraha movement in South Africa through organized efforts such as community protests or marches. In 1908 he was imprisoned in a Johannesburg jail for instigating Satyagraha, and that same year he encouraged Indians to burn their registration cards. Five years later, the flames of Satyagraha were still burning when Gandhi helped organize a nonviolent coal miners' strike where many men, women, and children marched for miles in treacherous conditions for justice. Gandhi's

many efforts helped Indians in South Africa achieve important civil and social rights.

Gandhi and Kasturba left South Africa in 1914 and returned to India where they continued to promote the Satyagraha movement to help India gain its independence from British rule. Over the next thirty-four years, Gandhi brought forth ingenious, nonviolent ways to protest English rule via strikes, the boycott of products, community programs, marches and fasts. For example, Gandhi encouraged Indians to boycott British goods, such as apparel, by encouraging them to spin their own thread and weave their own cotton fabric, called *khadi*. Nonviolence was always one of Gandhi's guiding principles, and when and if violence did occur throughout the years, it devastated him.

Nonetheless, Gandhi continued to lead peaceful marches. The most famous among these was the 1930 Salt March where he and about 80 Satyagrahis walked 240 miles from the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad to the coastal town of Dandi to protest the British control of salt. When the Satyagrahis were attacked, they did not resort to violence or fight back, as Gandhi steadfastly advised. News spread around the world about brutal attacks on the Satyagrahis, and the Salt March was a historic catalyst for change.

Gandhi's Satyagraha movement was key in helping India gain its independence from England in 1947. Because of this, Gandhi is often fondly called the "Father of the Nation." One year later, when Gandhi was assassinated, millions turned out and marched through the streets of Delhi to honor and mourn the loss of their Mahatma.

Now, nearly seventy years later, people around the world continue to hope for and stand up for human rights, peace, equality, and a healthy planet. In so many ways, the willingness of people to stand together and voice their wishes for a more harmonious world vividly reflects the powerful method of nonviolent resistance that Gandhi inspired. Gandhi's Satyagraha movement is a shining light to help guide us in the days ahead and to create positive change in our lives and world. It's a powerful ideal we can all strive for that embodies the ever-important concepts of ahimsa (love) and satya (truth). 🌸

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