

Nonviolence – The Only Hope

By Arun Gandhi

It is difficult to reconcile Gandhian thought with the modern theory that nonviolence is simply a strategy of convenience. In the words of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi nonviolence “is not a coat that you can wear today and take off tomorrow.” Although Gandhi emphasized the need for spirituality in the practice of nonviolence that was not the only reason why he believed nonviolence must be a way of life. For Gandhi living nonviolence was a practical necessity. Unless one lives it, one cannot practice nonviolence. Just as we are required to create a whole culture of violence around us to practice violence we need to create a culture of nonviolence around us to practice nonviolence.

The complexities of Gandhi’s nonviolence need to be understood holistically and not dogmatically. It is unfortunate that most scholars have looked at nonviolence only as the opposite of physical violence. We cannot appreciate the depths of nonviolence until we appreciate the breath of violence that is practiced in society today. Just as the absence of war is not peace superficial calm in a society does not indicate the lack of turmoil and conflict.

If Gandhiji was concerned about freeing India from the Imperial clutches of Britain he was more concerned about freeing human society from the stranglehold of the Culture of Violence. A culture that is so deep-rooted and pervasive that most of us have come to believe violence is our inherent nature. There is a problem with this argument. If violence is indeed our nature why do we need martial arts institutes and military academies to teach us to fight and kill? Why are we not born with these instincts?

The fact is it is not violence that is our true nature but anger, the fuel that generates violence. Anger is, to use an electrical analogy, the fuse that warns us of a malfunction. However, sadly, we have learned to abuse anger instead of using it intelligently because the culture of violence is based on the need to control through fear. Psychologists have recently concluded that an inordinately high number – over 70 per cent – of the violence that plagues human societies everywhere is the result of the abuse of anger. Anger is an important emotion that plays a significant role in our lives and yet we have ignored it totally.

Does our ignorance mean there is nothing human beings can do to stop the abuse of anger? I believe we have the commonsense and the capacity to learn and improve our nature. At Sevagram ashram in the late forties there were two things that Gandhiji stressed in our daily lessons. First, that we develop the ability to evaluate ourselves regularly – in the words of Socrates “An unexamined life is not worth living” – and second, that we learn to channel anger into constructive use rather than destructive abuse.

He told us anger is like electricity – just as powerful and useful when used intelligently, but as destructive and deadly when abused. Like electricity, the energy of anger must be channeled intelligently to serve humanity constructively. Writing an anger

journal is one way of recording the offensive episode for posterity. However, the intention should not be simply to get the anger out of one's system but to find an equitable solution to the problem that caused the anger. A problem nipped in the bud saves a lot of grief.

Gandhiji also emphasized the need to understand the manifold ways in which humans practice violence. Apart from the physical violence – wars, killings, beatings, murders, rape etc. – we commit an inordinately large amount of passive violence both consciously and unconsciously in the form of hate, prejudice, discrimination, oppression, name-calling, teasing, looking down on people, speaking to people impolitely, classifying people by their religion, their economic standing, their gender, their habits and the millions of other ways in which our actions or even inaction hurt people. In a selfish, self-centered world we ignore the plight of people, we continue to over consume the resources of the world and continue to create an economic imbalance and generate anger. Passive violence is, therefore, the fuel that ignites physical violence so, logically, if we want to put an end to physical violence we have to cut-off the fuel supply.

We are building mega urban societies around the world that lack soul and substance. We ignore the basic question – can a society be cohesive, compassionate and caring if every member is taught to be selfish and self-centered? In Gandhian terms a society is an enlarged family and should possess the same positive characteristics – compassion and cohesiveness. However, the materialistic society we have created not only fosters selfishness but we encourage it in our children when we advise them to be successful at whatever cost. Passive violence festers in every society until it becomes unbearable and eventually explodes into physical violence. It incidentally, brings into question our concept of justice. In a world steeped in the culture of violence justice has come to mean revenge – an eye for an eye, Gandhiji said, only makes the whole world blind. In a culture of nonviolence justice would mean reformation by recognizing that those who do wrong do it out of ignorance or attenuating circumstances. Punishing the person instead of resolving the problem only aggravates physical violence in the form of crime and violence.

The story of the star fish has an appropriate moral lesson for us. A man once went early in the morning to the beach for a walk. Dawn was still minutes away from breaking. In the haze he saw a figure near the water's edge picking something up and throwing it into the water. Out of curiosity he went to enquire and was told that during the night the tide came in and washed all the star fish ashore and when the sun comes out they will all perish. The curious man looked at the shoreline and saw thousands of star fish stranded. He said: "You aren't going to be able to save all these starfish so what difference is it going to make?" The Good Samaritan was still busy throwing the star fish and had one in his hand that he was about to toss into the water as he turned and said: "It will make a big difference to this guy." The moral clearly is that we should not be overwhelmed by the state of the world and do nothing to change the world. Gandhiji always believed that small acts of change can ultimately make a big difference. That is the essence of Gandhiji's message.