

King and Asia:
The Influence of Gandhi's Concept of *Satyagraha*
on the Non-violence Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Introduction

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), perhaps the most famous martyr on the United States of the twentieth century, was not a mere social justice activist who demanded black rights. Rather his movement was an accumulated theoretical production of contemporary American theology, from the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) to the Bostonian Personalism of Albert Knudson (1873-1953) and Edgar Brightman (1884-1953).¹ Dr. King has interacted with many contemporary theologians through his personal contacts or private readings of their theological works, such as the monographs of Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, throughout his intensive academic training from Morehouse College (B. A. in 1948) to Boston University (Ph. D. in 1955). King's theological perspectives have also been sharpened and deepened by his visits to Africa, Central America, Europe and Asia throughout his short period of life time. As crossing cultural boundaries of other countries and continents, he had numerous opportunities to widen his theological horizon by having religious conversations with the leaders of other great religions. Through these cross-cultural experiences, King was able to claim not only the substantial particularity of his own Christian theology but also the universal dimension of his religious convictions. Among these inter-religious experiences of Martin Luther King, Jr., I would like to investigate his theological journey in Asia. It is my intension to expose the religious influence of Mahatma Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha* onto Dr. Martin Luther King's theological formulation of the non-violence theology. The final reflection will be added, emphasizing the importance of the economic elements in *Satyagraha* at the age of globalization.

I would like to claim here that King's method of nonviolence is solemnly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's life-long conviction in the validity of *Satyagraha* (सत्याग्रह), or nonviolent resistance. King himself indicates his theological journey as a "pilgrimage to non-violence" in his two self-biographical books, *Strength To Love* (1958) and *Stride Toward Freedom* (1963).² He firmly believes that the

¹ On the influence of Bostonian Personalism on Martin Luther King, Jr., see James Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Black Theology, Black Church, *Theology Today*, vol. 40, no. 4 (January, 1984).

² Martin L. King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper Collins, 1958), 90-107; Idem, *Strength To Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 146-154.

elimination of racism in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world is only possible through the method of non-violence and his conviction of non-violence came from his religious encounter with Mahatma Gandhi's *Satyagraha*, or non-violence resistance. He clearly declares as follows:

“Then I was introduced to the life and teaching of Mahatma Gandhi. As I read his works, I become deeply fascinated by his campaigns of non-violence resistance (*Satyagraha*). The whole Gandhian concept of *Satyagraha* was profoundly significant to me.”³

It is very peculiar that a Christian civil right movement leader has been deeply influenced by the basic ethical tenet of Hinduism for the search of the appropriate ways of campaigning against unjust racism. What is Mahatma Gandhi's understanding of *Satyagraha* in the religious tradition of Hinduism? Which moral and ethical components of *Satyagraha* are fascinating to an American civil right movement leader? What would be specific unjust conditions for the social application of *Satyagraha* in the context of racialism of the United States during the 1960s? What would be our theological reflections from Dr. King's acceptance and application of Mahatma Gandhi's *Satyagraha* in his struggles for the better society? Is *Satyagraha* or non-violent resistance applicable to the spheres of globalization where the presences of evil are invisible but omnipotent?

Gandhi's Early Development of *Satyagraha*

Mahatma Gandhi explains that his encounter with *Satyagraha* is originated from his close reading of the *Bhagavad-Gita* while he was living in Britain. It is quite interesting that his reading of the *Gita* was encouraged by the members of the Theosophical Society whom he met at various occasions for vegetarian gatherings. In his autobiography, Gandhi clearly confesses that his “memorizing of the *Gita* had to give [him] way to other work and the creation and nurture of *Satyagraha*.”⁴ The *Gita* gives him not only an infallible guide of moral and religious conducts but also religious conceptualization of *Satyagraha* for his spiritual life in the future.

It was South Africa where Gandhi first implemented the method of *Satyagraha* in his fighting for social justice and the eradication of racism. An ordinary Indian lawyer was dramatically changed as a freedom fighter under the awful circumstance of racial discrimination in South Africa where he had an occupational contract for legal service from 1893. He had suffered from many racist prejudice and violence. For example, he was requested by the court judge of Durban, South Africa to remove his turban

³ King, *Strength To Love*, 150.

⁴ Mohandas Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 265.

from his head at the court. Gandhi also had a bitter experience to be expelled from his first-class seat in the train for the convenience of a white passenger. He was thrown off by force at the station at Pietermaritzburg, Transvaal. He was even sometimes bitten by white mobs and bystanders while he was walking down the street.

A lawyer became a social activist: he organized the Natal Indian Congress in 1894 for the right to vote for the Indian immigrants in South Africa. He was the first Secretary for the NIC. The first application of *Satyagraha* was shown during the 1897 incident. When he came back from a short trip to his homeland, India, Gandhi was attacked by a white mob and the racist was arrested thereafter. When Gandhi refused to press legal charges against him, the earliest indication of *Satyagraha* was demonstrated at the court. The official adoption of *Satyagraha* was promulgated in 1906 when there was a mass protest against the Transvaal Government's New Act that prohibited the registration of Indian immigrants in South Africa. Gandhi asked his fellow Indians to resist through "nonviolent means" against the Transvaal Government. It has been called *Satyagraha Struggle* and the principles of *Satyagraha* were taking shapes during that period for the first time.

Mahatma Gandhi's ethico-political applications of *Satyagraha* in the Indian context comes from his tart experience with the British colonial rule as he could not able to fulfill his *dharma*, or socio-political and religious duties, under the harsh circumstance of racism and colonialism.⁵ All Indian males who belong to the first three upper castes should keep and follow the socio-religious modes of Hinduism, expressed in the *Book of Manu* and other religious books. David Taylor explains Gandhi's frustration as a high-caste Indian who must seek his ways of religious *dharma*: "For Gandhi at least, it was difficult to find an acceptable halfway house between active loyalty and active disloyalty. The colonial context of obligation provided little opportunity for participation in the service of the community."⁶

Under the British colonialism, the system of Hindu *dharma* was not only ineffective to be applied but also hard to be performed by the Indians in traditional Hindu culture and society. The relationship between one's *Sanatana Dharma*, or universal obligations, such as socio-political freedom and independence, and one's *Svadharm*a (literally, own way), or individual duties, such as civil loyalty to the ruler, has been seriously examined by Gandhi. It was Gandhi's conclusion that both *Sanatana Dharma* and *Svadharm*a under the British colonial rule could only achieved by the third way of *dharma*, that is, *Satyagraha*.

⁵ The Hindu *dharma* means Indian society's social codes through the ontological sense of "the way things are" and the societal imperative, "the way things should be."

⁶ David Taylor, "Concept of Duty Held by Indian Nationalist Thinkers", in Doniger O'Flaherty and J. Duncan Derrett, eds., *The Concept of Duty in South Asia* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), 206.

***Satyagraha* and Four *Satyagraha Asram* Vows**

The term *Satyagraha* is a compound Sanskrit word, *Satya* and *Agraha*, together mean “clinging to truth”, “holding fast to truth”, or “firm adherence to truth”. Gandhi himself preferred to use the term *Satyagraha* and distinguished it as a political method from other methods of civil resistance such as “civil disobedience,” or “passive resistance through non-cooperation.”⁷ To him, *Satyagraha* differs from other political methods as it insists absolute non-violence and willingness to suffer. He declares the true meanings of *Satyagraha* as follows:

“I can now see that all the principal events of my life, culminating in the vow of *brahmacharya*, were secretly preparing me for it (*Satyagraha*). The principle called *Satyagraha* came into being before that name was invented. Indeed when it was born, I myself could not say what it was. In Gujarati also we used that English phrase ‘passive resistance’ to describe it. When in a meeting of Europeans, I found that the term ‘passive resistance’ was too narrowly construed, that it was supposed to be a weapon of the weak, that it could be character as violence, I has to demur to all these statements and explain the real nature of the Indian movement. It was clear that a new word must be coined by the Indians to designate their struggle.”⁸

Thus, the true meanings of *Satyagraha* are independently defined by the Gandhian struggle against the racism of South Africa and the colonialism of Britain in India. It was not a mere civil disobedience or passive resistance, not because these terms lack the vitality of resistance but because these terms have some connotation of violence, which is executed by the weak. The principle of *Satyagraha* was not a disguised weapon for violence from the beginning. Rather, it had clear religious connotations as Gandhi expressed his willingness to suffer in the way of *Satyagraha*.

The *Satyagraha Asram* Vows are the overarching principles in which Gandhi believed all *Satyagrahi* (the follower of the way of *Satyagraha*) should follow in one’s daily life. Gandhi explains the importance of *Satyagraha Asram* Vows as following: “Taking vows is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. To do at any cost something that one ought to do constitutes a vow. It becomes a bulwark of strength.”⁹ Since the principle of *Satyagraha* has clear religious connotation, there are four particular religious dimensions.

1) Truth

⁷ Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, 318.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁹ Mahatma K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha: Non-Violence Resistance* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1951), 37.

As the first *Satyagraha Asram* Vow, the pursuit of truth is the most substantial element for the practice of *Satyagraha*. To Gandhi, devotion to truth is “the sole justification for our existence.”¹⁰ All applications and practices of *Satyagraha* should be centered in truth and the true meaning of *Satyagraha* would be impossible to observe any principles of life without it. In the *Satyagraha Asram*, the word Satya, or Truth, has a much wider significance. The pursuit of truth is not idealists’ practice of consciousness for justice: it rather requires truth in thought, truth in speech, and truth in action at the same time. The *Bhagavad Gita* elaborates on the elements of *Bhakti*: *Abhyasa*, or a single-minded devotion, and *Vairagya*, or indifference to all other interests in life to reach to truth. According to Gandhi’s *Satyagraha Asram*, the pursuit and practice of truth depends on true *Bhakti*, or absolute devotion to God. The truth of *Satyagraha Asram*, therefore, requires *Abhyasa* and *Vairagya* element of religious Bhaktism.

2) Ahimsa

Due to the impossibility of full realization of truth in human situation, Gandhi suggests the practice of *Ahimsa*, or non-killing to all other living beings. Gandhi has a remarkable understanding on and dedication to the practice of *Ahimsa* which strongly influenced upon the theology of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., later on. Gandhi explains the effectiveness of *Ahimsa* with a narrative of “punishing thieves”:

“We punish thieves because they harass us. They may leave us alone but they will only transfer their attentions to another victim. This other victim however is also a human being. We are caught in a vicious circle. This trouble from thieves continues to increase, as they think it is their business to steal. In the end, we see that it is better to endure the thieves than to punish them. By enduring them we realize that thieves are not different from ourselves, they are our brethren, our friends, and may not be punished... That would only induce cowardice. So we realize a further duty. Since we regard the thieves as our kith and kin, they must be made to realize the kinship. And so we must take pains to devise ways and means of winning them over. This is path of *Ahimsa*. It may entail continuous suffering and the cultivation of endless patience. Thus step by step we learn how to make friends with all the world; we realize the greatness of God, of Truth.”¹¹

To Gandhi, not to hurt any living beings is not full expression of the meaning of *Ahimsa*. Rather, the principle of *Ahimsa* suggests the seeking Truth by abolishing every evil thought and hatred to anybody.

3) Brahmacharya

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

In other words, *Ahimsa* means universal love so the fulfillment of *Ahimsa* is impossible without utter selflessness. In that sense, the third *Satyagraha Asram* vow, *Brahmacharya*, or chastity is needed. *Brahmacharya* must be observed in thought, word, and deed, but it has been believed to be very difficult, almost impossible to be observed by the ordinary people. According to Gandhi, the practice of *Brahmacharya* means control of all the sensible organs. If the observance of *Brahmacharya* is restricted by the definition and the aspects of sexual implications, the genuine practice of *Brahmacharya* becomes impossible. Thus, Gandhi suggests the harmony between the body and mind to fulfill the practice of *Brahmacharya*.

4) Non-possession

A seeker to Truth and a follower of the law of *Ahimsa* and *Brahmacharya* can not hold all things. The practice of non-possession is not able to achieve as all human beings have their own desire to possess. Gandhi's teaching on the fourth *Satyagraha Asram* vow, the practice of non-possession, comes from his close reading of Jesus' teaching on the Mount. His declaration for the practice of non-possession is very similar to Jesus' message on the Mount:

“God never stores for tomorrow. He never create more than what is strictly needed for the moment. We should rest assured that He will give us every day our daily bread.”¹²

The Prerequisites for the Practice of *Satyagraha*

Although Gandhi suggests four *Satyagraha Asram* vows as the primary requirements for the fulfillment of *Satyagraha*, he does not believe that these vows are a cure-all to the colonial and inhuman situation of the Indian society. His practice of *Satyagraha* includes proper conditions and prerequisites for the socio-political application.

By the definition, there should be no *Satyagraha* with an unjust cause since the application of *Satyagraha* should be pursued with commitment to upholding Truth. At any circumstance, the application of *Satyagraha* demands absolute non-violence methods. Thus, *Satyagraha* presupposes the capacity and willingness to suffer during the actual application. Gandhi believes that suffering is the most important element in the principle of *Satyagraha* and that the genuine practice of *Satyagraha* could not be achieved by rational persuasion. He firmly believes that *Satyagraha* could be achieved through one's capacity to

¹² Ibid., 45.

suffer: this capacity includes the spirit of service, renunciation, self-restraint and patience. The genuine application of *Satyagraha* also needs communal and legal circumstance. *Satyagraha* presupposes a reasoned and willing obedience to the laws of the State. Unless the state laws are immoral, people should show their active loyalty by obeying the laws of the State.

Gandhi also indicates how to deal with the opponents on the way of practicing *Satyagraha*. To him, the opponent is not an enemy to be destroyed or defeated. The opponent is rather a person who needs to become a better person for himself or herself and for the wider society. The genuine *Satyagrahi* has a special obligation to enter into reasonable discussion with the opponents with a positive expectation toward awakening the opponents' sense of justice and fairness. For Gandhi, *Satyagraha* could not be restored for personal gain but only for the goodness of others.

The Influence of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* on Martin Luther King, Jr.

Following steps in his father's ministerial callings King enrolled for the seminary education at Crozer Theological Seminary, Pennsylvania. In the seminary classroom, he had an opportunity to learn about Mahatma Gandhi's teaching of *Satyagraha* and maintained his academic and practical curiosity about the Indian way of non-violent resistance. While Martin Luther King was a doctoral student at Boston University, he came under the influence of Gandhi's teaching again through the teaching of Dr. Allen Knight Chalmers (1897-1972) who had long been engaged in the civil right movement in the United States. Dr. Chalmers tried to promulgate the teaching of Gandhi's non-violent resistance method in his Boston classrooms. Under his influence, King found the capacity and power of non-violent resistance method for the first time. King realized that the Christian doctrine of love could operate through the Gandhian method of non-violence and Gandhi's *Satyagraha* indeed would be "one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom."¹³ To learn more about Mahatma Gandhi and his principles of *Satyagraha*, King and his wife Coretta (1927-2006), who had initiated the historic civil right movement with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956, undertook a six-week pilgrimage to India in 1959. With the invitation by the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) and the Gandhi Memorial Trust under the auspices of the American Friends Service Committee, the historic journey began from February 9 in Mumbai and continued for the next four weeks. James Bristol, who accompanied with Kings' journey to India, lists his impressions on King's "unswerving dedication to non-violence, never considering even for a split second and deviation from his commitment to and his genuine live for his enemies, his ability to harbor no hatred in his heart and forgive genuinely and

¹³ King, *Strength to Love*, 150.

completely even those who had bombed his home, and threatened his wife and children.”¹⁴

King later elaborates five basic philosophical aspects of his “non-violence method”. First, non-violence method is not a socio-political program for cowards. Echoing Gandhi’s formula, King stresses,

“It is must be emphasized that non-violent resistance is not a method for cowards. It does resist. If one uses this method because he [*sic*] is afraid or merely because he [*sic*] lacks the instruments of violence, he [*sic*] is not true nonviolent. This is why Gandhi often said that if cowardice is the only alternative to violence, it is better to fight.”¹⁵

Thus the method of nonviolence is for “the strong,” whose mind and emotion are always active and the strong person should be “constantly seeking to persuade his opponent that he [*sic*] is wrong.”¹⁶

Second, the method of nonviolence does not pursue to defeat or humiliate the opponent but to win the opponent’s friendship and understanding. The most ultimate goal of nonviolence method is to awakening “a sense of moral shame in the opponent.” Third, the method of nonviolence is the attacking against forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing the evil. Fourth, the method of nonviolent resistance is “a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation, to accept blows from the opponent without striking back.”¹⁷ Finally, the method of nonviolent resistance is to avoid “not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit.”¹⁸ After these five basic aspects of nonviolent resistance are fully examined, one should take a further step for action. In his famous letter from Birmingham Jail, King suggests four steps for the actual actions: (1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive; (2) negotiation with the opponents; (3) self-purification before action; (4) direct action.¹⁹

It seems evident that King’s five basic aspects of nonviolent campaign and the subsequent four steps for the action itself are closely related to Gandhi’s conditions for the social applications of *Satyagraha*.

King and Asia: Closing Thought about *Satyagraha* in the Age of Globalization

¹⁴ James Bristol, “After the Assassination: What?”, in *Gandhi Marg*, vol. 47 (1968, July), 281.

¹⁵ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 102.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 103.

¹⁸ Ibid., 103-104.

¹⁹ King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” This famous letter can easily be found on the internet: for example, see http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

King and Asia met together through the ethico-political framework of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* even long before Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat* is written. The historical fact that two great thinkers and freedom movement leaders actually shared the same vision of non-violent resistance against unjust system of the pre-globalization world: British colonialism and White American racism. To eradicate these gruesome evils, King was not hesitant to learn more about the basic philosophy and practical method of *Satyagraha* from his seminary period. The Indian leaders who succeeded the noble spirit of Gandhi showed their utmost interest, sharing their spiritual father's tenets of *Satyagraha* while King was visiting India. King and Asia shared the same vision of egalitarian and democratic system in the way on *Satyagraha*. King and Asia were united for the hope of a just society indeed.

It is quite normal and necessary to raise the following questions: Is *Satyagraha* still application method of fighting unjust system in the world of globalization where the real enemy is not easily identified. When the enemy is not a collective single entity like the British colonial system and American racists as before, how is possible to carry the basic tenets of *Satyagraha* against its invisible opponents?²⁰ If the centers of globalization are found among capitalists' world market plans, rather than among politicians' pursuit of power, what would be necessary for the economic formula for the spirit of *Satyagraha*?

It seems that two giant leaders' dream in *Satyagraha* has come true since India became an independent country from the British colonial rule and the people of the United States amazingly witnessed the inauguration of the first black president at the White House. The political vision of *Satyagraha* in freedom and democracy has been fulfilled, actually more than Gandhi and King ever dreamed. However, the economic justice for the global poor is becoming worse as the speed and sphere of globalization are increasing and expanding ever. It is time to examine again to the details of historic movement of *Satyagraha* from economical perspectives. In addition to four major *Asram* Vows, for example, Gandhi suggests seven more Vows: fearlessness, control of the palate, non-stealing, bread-labor, equality of religions, anti-untouchability, and *Swadeshi*. Comparing the pre-existing four major Vows (Upholding the Truth, Ahimsa, Brahmacharya, and Non-Possession), some later Vows are detail oriented for the economic life of the ordinary Indian people. It seems that the movement of *Satyagraha* in the twenty-first century needs more to understand economic side of the *Satyagraha* Vows since the present globalization is dominantly propelled by the gigantic engine of world-wide economy. Even though the Indians are boasting their membership in BRICs and the Black Americans are boasting their first Black President Obama, their way to economic freedom is a long way to go. For the final attainment of *Satyagraha*, religio-political side should be put aside a little and the economic just system should be focused more in the age of globalization. It may be called *Satyagraha* 2.0.

²⁰ For the "enemy" of globalization, see Amory Starr, *Naming the Enemy: Anti-Corporate Movements Confront Globalization* (Zed Books, 2001).

Keywords

Satyagraha, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. Non-Violent Resistance, Globalization, Ahimsa, Brahmacharya.

Abstracts

Martin Luther King, Jr. used the methods of the non-violent resistance while he launched the civil right movement with the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956. The present paper aims to trace the origin of Dr. King's theology of non-violence movement and its implication at the age of globalization. Dr. King's method of nonviolence is influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's conviction in the validity of *Satyagraha* (सत्याग्रह), or nonviolent resistance. King himself indicates his early contact with Gandhi's *Satyagraha* at the seminary classroom at Crozer, Pennsylvania, and through the teaching of Dr. Allen Chalmers of Boston University. Even he and his wife Coretta made a personal vision trip to India to learn more about the basic tenets of *Satyagraha* in 1959. While and after the Indian pilgrimage Dr. King firmly believed that the elimination of racism in the United States and elsewhere in the world was only possible through the method of non-violence and his conviction of non-violence theology came from his religious encounter with Mahatma Gandhi's *Satyagraha*.

To investigate more about the cross-cultural sharing the vision of *Satyagraha* which was executed by two great freedom movement leaders, the author explains the basic Vows of *Satyagraha* and Dr. King's adaptation of the basic principles onto his method of non-violent resistance in detail. The final reflection is added, emphasizing the importance of the economic elements in *Satyagraha* at the age of globalization.

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