

In the Gāthā Study Circle, we discussed how Zarathuštra’s teachings could be applied in daily living, in the world in which we live today. The subject of discrimination arose during those discussions. While the nation is struggling to respond to the discrimination against African Americans and other minorities, it was pointed out that discrimination exists in our own community of Zarathuštis. Kersy Dastur raised the central question, “how can we address discrimination within Zarathušti community?”

In a subsequent meeting, I pointed out that Mahātmā Gāndhi had experimented with methods of resolving conflicts all his life, and had written extensively about it. So to get the ball rolling, I presented a summary of Gāndhi’s writings on the subject. This is included below, with a hope that it will prompt a productive discussion and concrete actions.

***Satya* (Truth), *Ahimsā* (Non-violence), and *Satyāgraha* (Non-violent non-cooperation)**

(i) *Satya* (Truth):

Sat literally means *that which is*. The word is generally translated as *Truth*. In practice it implies *what is right*. How do we know what is *Truth*? Gandhi says: “A difficult question; but I have solved it for myself by saying that it is what the voice within tells you.” There is an inborn intuition in all of us that allows us to grasp what is right and what is wrong. (In the Gāthās this faculty is called *Vohu Manō*). Why is it that many people do not seem to possess a clear sense of what is right? Because to be guided by this inner faculty, we need to completely remove self-will (ego) from our consciousness. Gandhi calls it “we need to make ourselves zero.” As long as self-interests remain, we cannot see the world as it is; we cannot grasp the *Truth*. Some manifestations of self-will are hatred, greed, anger, fear, and envy. If we purge ourselves of these negative tendencies, *Truth* will reveal itself to us unfailingly.

Once we recognize what is wrong, we are expected to try to correct it. “Evil exists because we support it. If we *withdrew* our support, it will cease to exist.” Gandhi tells us that the resistance against evil must be non-violent. This is the practice of *Ahimsā*.

(ii) *Ahimsā* (non-violence):

Ahimsā, non-violence, was the noblest expression of *Truth* for Gandhi – or, properly speaking, the way to *Truth*. *Ahimsā* is the means; *Truth* is the end.

“*Ahimsā* is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt a part of *ahimsā*. But it is its least expression. The principle of *ahimsā* is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by wishing ill to anybody. It is also violated by our holding on to what the world needs.”

“Non-violence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law – to the strength of the spirit.”

The word non-violence connotes a negative, almost passive condition, whereas the *Sanskrit* term *ahimsā* suggests a dynamic state of mind in which power is released. “Strength,” Gandhi said, “does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.”

Gandhi’s adherence to non-violence grew from his experience that it was the only way to resolve the problem of conflict permanently. Violence, he felt, made only the pretense of a solution, and sowed seeds of bitterness and enmity that would ultimately disrupt the situation.

“I have applied *ahimsā* in every walk of life: domestic, institutional, economic, political. And I know of no single case in which it has failed.” Anything short of this total application did not interest Gandhi, because *ahimsā* sprang from and worked in the same continuum as his religion, politics, and personal life. “Only practice could determine its value, when it acts in the midst of and in spite of opposition,” and he advised critics to observe the results of his experiments rather than dissect his theories.

Ahimsā is the backbone of *satyāgraha* (discussed in below), the “irreducible minimum” to which *satyāgraha* adheres, and the final measure of its value.

(iii) *Satyāgraha* – non-violent non-cooperation :

Satyāgraha literally means “holding on to *Truth*.” *Satyāgraha*, in practice, is a method for resolving conflict. Traditionally, conflict between opposed parties is “resolved” only by the acknowledged dominance of one antagonist over the other. Success may come by reason or persuasion, by threat or blackmail, or by force, but in any case, the assumption is the same: if there is to be a winner, there must be a loser.

Satyāgraha challenges this assumption. The purpose of *satyāgraha* is not the redress of grievances; these are incidental to its ultimate aim, which is to resolve the underlying sources of conflict, the enmity, and the distrust.

Gandhi lived by reason, but he knew that reason alone does not move men’s hearts. Nevertheless, he always appealed first to the minds of his adversaries. “Due process” is the first step in the process of *satyāgraha*, but the ways of custom, law, and vested interest are often impervious to reason. “In the application of *satyāgraha*, the pursuit of *Truth* did not admit of violence being inflicted on one’s opponent, but that he must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy. And patience means self-suffering. So, the doctrine came to mean vindication of *Truth*, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one’s own self.”

His sympathy, his patience, his trust, and his willingness to suffer are the main “weapons” with which the *satyāgrahi* transforms his opponent and alters the nature of the conflict relationship.

In his effort to build trust, the *satyāgrahi* must be careful not to harass or embarrass his opponent, and will go out of his way to afford him every courtesy.

Gandhi argued that when the appeal to reason fails, methods such as civil disobedience provide the *satyāgrahi* with the opportunity to suffer, and make visible that suffering, which is the final and purest weapon that *satyāgrahi* has with which to secure his vision.

Open-endedness encourages the *satyāgrahi* to look continually for truth in a campaign, even in his opponent's position, and to incorporate that truth into his own position. The mere disposition to reconsider one's position can neutralize the atmosphere of conflict, making it less rigid and creating a climate in which there can be give-and-take. Within this climate of trust, antagonistic claims can evolve into a synthesized, unified expression of *truth*.

Satyāgraha is not a method, any more than love is a method. It is essentially an attitude, an interior condition of non-violent love. Properly applied, *satyāgraha* carries irresistible power. *Satyāgraha* is first and last a personal matter. Its power is independent of number. If a single *satyāgrahi* holds out to the end, victory is certain. *Satyāgraha* is individual, and needs to be applied in all contexts: family, workplace, nation, and world.

Key elements of Satyāgraha:

- (1) Try reasoning first.
- (2) Understand the opponent's positions, and consider opportunities to modify your own position without compromising the essentials.
- (3) Avoid putting down, embarrassing or harming the opponent. Show genuine concern for their welfare.
- (4) Trust the opponent repeatedly, even if they let you down during the process.
- (5) If reasoning fails, find a way to make visible self-suffering. This most important step is the creative part of the process. Gandhi took time to decide on the right response. He took many days before arriving at the idea of the "salt march."