

The Spiritual Foundations of Gandhi's *Satyagraha*

Andrej Ule

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Abstract

I present Gandhi's main ideas about *satyagraha*, viz. commitment to truth. This is Gandhi's central ethical and spiritual guide. All other relevant concepts or ideas of Gandhi revolve around *satyagraha*, particularly *ahimsa* (nonviolence). According to him, nonviolence represents unconditional value that stems from a commitment to the absolute truth within us. This commitment encompasses and pervades all other definitions and attitudes of people, not just due to some particular ethical decision. Gandhi therefore equated the notion of God with the notion of (absolute) truth. Observing *ahimsa* makes the Truth become divine for us. Gandhi's *satyagraha* requires a fundamental ethical and spiritual attitude of individuals towards a certain unconditionality (absoluteness), which is reflected in the everyday life and work of people, and not some special set of ideas or beliefs. I call it "radical humanity (Humanicity)". Namely, I believe that it is from such an ethical and spiritual attitude of people as individuals, particularly those who have the ability and power to govern other people, that the current world will either survive and overcome the current and future crises or will be misled into hopeless barbarism and self-destruction. Humanity as an ethical and spiritual attitude is an existential or spiritual expression of human universal relationality, i.e. the ability to find oneself in everything one is in a relationship with and to find everything in oneself.

Keywords: *satyagraha*, nonviolence, God, absolute truth, radical humanity

Beyond a doubt, Mohandas K. Gandhi is a giant of the twentieth century. He is one of those few great people who restore our faith in man and humanity, in spite of all the evils and insanities of all kinds that have snatched the souls and bodies of too many people in this sad century. He was also a living proof of the fact that in the struggle between good and evil quality conquers quantity, wisdom overcomes raw power, truth conquers lies and love conquers hate. He achieved this primarily throughout his life and work. It is only because he was a witness of his ideas and visions through his life and work that they have become interesting and important to us. It is similar with the historical effect of his activity. Without a shred of doubt, it is major, and India's nonviolent independence from British colonialism is only one, perhaps the most notable, but not necessarily the most important historical effect. Yet this is not what makes Gandhi a giant; he is a giant because he associated India's independence from beginning to end with his own life, more particularly, by dedicating his life to truth and nonviolence. This is exactly the

opposite of what usually happens with famous people; their ideas and visions and external events that are related to their work are important, and their lives or the extent and level of realisation of their ideas in their lives only come second. However, the realisation of radical humanity beyond all “humanistic” ideologies requires mutual integration of ethical virtues, respect for freedom and dignity of all people, and the spiritual joy that emanates from the conscious absolute dimension of human existence. This is a task that certainly goes beyond any, however important human activity and any particular form of consciousness. Every man can and must find his way to radical humanity. It is not so much about how far he reaches in his realisation, but rather whether he moves in the right direction.

Gandhi writes in his autobiography that he considers his whole life a single collection of experiments with truth. These experiments took place mainly in the spiritual or moral field, but their consequences led him to many and far-reaching decisions and activities that associated his life with other people; in particular, with his countrymen both in India and abroad. In the *Introduction* to his autobiography, Gandhi explicitly points out that he did not conduct his experiments with truth behind closed doors, but among people, although they certainly had their own completely personal sides as well.

It is the very mixture of modernity and traditionalism that is characteristic of Gandhi. It is true that he was not the only one in this. In his pursuit to combine modernity and tradition, Gandhi followed a whole series of Indian reformers who had appeared since the beginning of the 19th century. One of the greatest, and in many ways complementary spirit, who also originally combined the Indian tendency to modernise with the deepest layers of the Indian spiritual tradition was Gandhi’s contemporary Rabindranath Tagore. However, Gandhi was the only one who managed to attract crowds, people of different religions, social classes, political orientations, both intellectuals and ordinary people, people from the cities and villages. What is it about that charm that attracted all these people and still arouses interest and admiration, both in India and abroad?

I think that it was mainly his exceptional honesty and openness in relation to others and to himself and at the same time the acceptance of all, but above all the fact that he always stood by his words and turned them into actions. People thus saw in him a rare example of wisdom, active love for others and a man that they could trust and follow. All of this, along with his personal history, created an extraordinary charisma and leadership power among the Indian people that Gandhi never tried to exploit for any personal or particular goals. Gandhi’s charisma quickly spread from the Indian subcontinent to the entire world, making him one of the first and most remarkable “citizens of the world” or “men of all time”.

Gandhi’s thought and action were based on some basic principles he had developed early, in part during his studies in London (for instance, commitment to truth,

vegetarianism, religious tolerance while simultaneously attached to the foundations of Hinduism), in particular, during his stay in South Africa (strategy of nonviolence, civil disobedience in the fight against violent and unjust actions of the authorities, advocacy of basic democracy and rejection of the caste system, inherent asceticism). Among these, two are the most relevant: his unconditional commitment to truth and nonviolence. These two principles were the basis of all other Gandhi teachings and practices as well as the basis of his struggle for the independence of India from British colonial rule.

Gandhi understood commitment to truth as a moral and spiritual duty. He believed in the existence of an absolute truth (often written with a capital letter "Truth"), holistic and all-encompassing. He equated it with what actually and intrinsically exists, which, for him, is equivalent to God. The Sanskrit word for truth is *satya*, which means both truth and what truly resides. Later, Gandhi deepened or radicalised the equation of Truth and God, so that for him the equation Truth = God applies. That is why Gandhi calls this fundamental ethical and spiritual orientation *satyagraha* (a term originally "invented" by Gandhi's supporter in South Africa), clinging to the truth, persevering or even following the truth.

In fact, Gandhi's idea of *satyagraha* as an active nonviolent struggle for justice and humanity began in South Africa long before the very term for it was coined. As he writes in his autobiography, perhaps the key period were the events surrounding the outbreak of the plague in 1904 in South Africa, particularly in its largest city Johannesburg. Even before the outbreak of the crisis, Gandhi, with his letters to the authorities and the local media, criticised the catastrophic living and health conditions in the neighbourhoods where the Indians (as well as black people) lived, and warned of the real possibility of an outbreak of dangerous infectious diseases, e.g. plagues that would threaten the entire city. And that is exactly what happened. The plague broke out first among the Indian miners and spread rapidly throughout the Indian Quarter. Soon there were many sick and dead. The city authorities ordered a strict quarantine of the entire district, then a rapid relocation of the entire neighbourhood to safer and more isolated land outside the city, and the former Indian quarter was burned to the ground. However, all this would not have helped much if Gandhi, with his courage, dedication and his assistants, had not quickly organised at least minimal medical care for the sick, and set up an emergency hospital where volunteers worked, at his own expense and at the expense of his slightly wealthier friends. Gandhi was among the most active.

Gandhi even treated some patients with his special method, i.e. by applying earth compresses, and indeed some of the terminally ill were cured. Gandhi always called on his compatriots to maintain individual and group obedience to the city authorities, in spite of all the distress, illnesses, injustices and violence of the authorities, because only in this way could they quickly and collectively overcome the deadly disease. It was during the plague that Gandhi firmly committed to strict vegetarianism and to a modest

and natural diet. According to him, such a diet also protected him from infection with a dangerous disease. The events during the plague greatly increased Gandhi's reputation, not only among the Indians but also among the Europeans.

Immediately after the end of the epidemic, Gandhi became acquainted with Ruskin's book *Unto This Last*, where Ruskin criticised modern capitalist society, the ruthless exploitation of people and nature, and rejected all violence between people as well as human violence against other living beings. This book, at least according to Gandhi, provided a key intellectual and moral impetus for the development of his own idea of the inner connection between nonviolence and the unconditional quest for Truth. Gandhi realised that what he had been doing more or less unconsciously until then, as a young lawyer fighting against racial discrimination against the Indian minority in what was then South Africa and what he had been doing during the plague epidemic, was in fact the same as Ruskin's fundamental ideas.

As he wrote in his *Autobiography*, he drew three main teachings from Ruskin's book:

1. that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all;
2. that a lawyer's work has the same value as a barber's, in as much as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work;
3. that a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the craftsman, is the life worth living.¹

According to Gandhi, the second and third teachings are in fact contained in the first, and by "the good contained in the good of all" he understood the divine inner core of man (and of all living beings, in general). He decided that from then on he would implement these principles in his daily life. Thus, the foundation of Gandhi's *satyagraha*, as well as of other related concepts, was laid: *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *sarvodaya* (progress for all), *swaraj* (self-government), and *swadeshi* (political and economic independence of India). Certainly, for our own time, which, like the South African plague period, is struggling with a dangerous disease, it can also be useful to take into account Gandhi's core experience and lessons from his struggle against the plague. Above all, I think it is important to be aware of the deeper connection and equal respect of all people, from which comes a sense of solidarity and of the provision of unreserved mutual assistance in times of common distress, especially to those who are powerless and marginalised.

If we aim to understand Gandhi, we must first of all understand the inner connection between Gandhi's central ethical-political notions, *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*. For him, *satyagraha* meant such an embrace of truth and trust in truth as our highest power, which in itself precludes the use of violence. In the original Indian tradition already, *ahimsa* means not only non-harm of any living being, but also the absence of any evil thoughts, lies, hatred, desire to hurt anyone, etc. It is therefore a radical and comprehensive ethical and

1 Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, 336.

life principle that is affirmed in the daily life of the individual or social groups and aims towards certain absoluteness. Nonviolence or *ahimsa* was strictly observed in particular by members of Jainism, an extremely ascetic non-Hindu religion that began as early as the time of the Buddha and even competed with Buddhism for a while. However, other important Indian religions and sects also advocated for various forms of nonviolence. It is about nonviolence in terms of unconditional value, as a commitment to something absolute within us that encompasses and permeates all other definitions and attitudes of human beings, not just a particular ethical decision, as one alongside the other.

Gandhi constantly stressed this “absolute” aspect of nonviolence and associated it primarily with his commitment to truth. Gandhi concluded that the truth could not be found by anyone who had not attained a great sense of modesty. Sometimes, he felt fulfilled with the presence of this truth. At that time, no hostile thought could arise in him towards anyone, and this attitude sometimes affected his opponents to become his friends. Gandhi was aware that he was only partially successful in these endeavours, but he firmly believed that in a man who is filled with the peace of God, all hatred ceases.

According to Gandhi, not only is there no real nonviolence without loyalty to truth, but without nonviolence it is not possible to seek or find the truth, because resorting to violence forces us to see in other people (or living beings) only a certain narrow aspect, most often the one determined by our mutual conflicts and conflicting interests, and we close ourselves off to other aspects or dimensions of people (or living beings, in general) coming towards us. For Gandhi, active nonviolence and loyalty to truth were two sides of the same coin. Observing *ahimsa* makes the truth become divine for us.

Gandhi developed his concept of nonviolent political struggle gradually by associating the Hindu notion of *ahimsa* to Tolstoy's, Ruskin's, Emerson's, and Thoreau's ideas of nonviolence, civil disobedience, and passive resistance; however, his idea and practice of nonviolence were very original and, above all, more practical, ethical and politically oriented. He freed the idea of nonviolent political struggle from the implicit notion that it was only a “means” or a “weapon” of the weak, that is, of those who could not afford violent or armed resistance against injustices or violence as they were committed by the authorities. For Gandhi, nonviolence was a universal principle of individual and social action, rooted in the resolute commitment of individuals and in common truth and humanity (love), not a fallback for those who wanted to resist violence and discrimination but did not have the strength or the weapons to fight openly. Therefore, Gandhi also avoided the term “passive resistance” stressing that it is the active resistance of the brave and strong, who are strong because their weapons are truth and humanity (love).

It can also be said that Gandhi was quite “fortunate” in his political activities to have faced such opponents on several occasions, who were sensitive to and receptive enough for the implicit tendencies of *satyagraha* to “convert” from violence to peaceful

resolution of disputes. English democratic culture and English public opinion, which was generally very favourable to Gandhi, probably contributed a lot to this. From the very beginning, Gandhi stressed that nonviolent resistance to injustice and violence should not be confused with indulgence in injustice and violence, for this is cowardice, which is a worse evil than the use of force. Therefore, he stressed – if he had cowardice and violence to choose from, he would still choose violence. Thus, he also thought it better for India to take up arms if it wants to defend its honour, than to become or remain a coward and helpless witness in its own dishonouring.²

Gandhi always associated the idea of *satyagraha* and the struggle for India's independence with his own social and economic revolution. He was not a socialist or a communist, but he accepted some of the ideas of both movements. It could be said that he was a nonviolent religious anarchist. In the first place, he opposed the all-encompassing power of the modern state and blind industrialisation. According to him, the state represents violence in a concentrated and organised form. Above all, it is a soulless machine that never gives up violence and its entire existence relies on it. Even a state that seeks to serve people, for instance by reducing exploitation, is harmful. Therefore, Gandhi also opposed the socialist idea of state ownership of the means of production, because this merely brings new injustices and new violence. According to him, true socialism can only be based on the ethical conversion of individuals into truth-loving and nonviolent people.

For Gandhi, therefore, Indian democracy should not become a mere imitation of Western parliamentary democracies, because, according to him, the parliaments too are only slightly embellished emblems of slavery. He accepted only Lincoln's definition of democracy as "the government of the people, by the people, for the people." He also rejected democracy based on majority rule, because the majority vote must not bind the minority. Therefore, according to him, the only option for true democracy (*swaraj*) is a non-state and decentralised social order based on many self-governing units, such as village communities and village councils (*panchayats*). The villages were to unite in various circles, constantly expanding but never ascending. In this way, there would be a society that is not a pyramid and hierarchically organised, but rather "an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance, but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units".³

At first sight, Gandhi's ideas seem to be an expression of hopeless conservatism and an "inability" to see the necessity of technical and economic progress. In fact, they are

2 Gandhi, *Young India*, August 11th 1920; in: Prabhu, R. K., U. R. Rao, ed. *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, 187.

3 Gandhi, "Democracy and Non-Violence", 149.

an expression of Gandhi's concern for the fate of India if it blindly follows the path of Western (and Eastern) industrial societies. He was concerned that the rapid penetration of large-scale industries and mass production would rapidly deagrarianise India, plunging large sections of the Indian peasant population into even greater poverty than they had hitherto experienced, and above all abolish the self-sufficiency of Indian villages and small farmers that had long been a feature of rural India.

Gandhi's ideas of nonviolent social transformation and decentralised and non-industrialised society may have seemed naive and hopelessly conservative to many "progressive" minds in his time, but today we can discern in them the outlines of another modernisation, one that is more suitable for post-industrial modernity than for the beginnings of (industrial) modernity in India in his time. However, these ideas remained only in drafts because Gandhi, unfortunately, could not follow the development of an independent India, which at least on the face of it, was moving in exactly the opposite direction to what he had expected. Today, India is one of the economic (and military) superpowers, armed to the teeth and ready for the battles for a new "division of the world" that are about to begin. I fear that this path will lead to an Indian as well as a global catastrophe. I think both India and the rest of the world need to take Gandhi seriously; not as some supposedly saintly icon, but with what he actually represents with his critique of the modern world.

Gandhi's *satyagraha* requires a fundamental ethical and spiritual orientation of individuals to a certain unconditionality (absoluteness), which is reflected in the everyday life and actions of people, and not a particular set of ideas and beliefs. I call it "radical humanity", for I believe it is precisely on such ethical and spiritual attitudes of human beings as individuals, especially those who have the ability and power to govern other human beings, that the present world could survive and outgrow the current and future crises, or it might degenerate into barbarism and self-destruction. Humanity as an ethical and spiritual attitude is the existential or spiritual expression of human universal relationality, i.e. the ability to find oneself in everything one is in relation with and to find everything in oneself. This dimension of human being can be called "absolute" as it gives measure to everything and is itself immeasurable. When I say "absolute dimension", I am not presupposing or demanding a relationship to any particular absolute, be it a personal or impersonal god, although I do of course allow for such a notion of the absolute dimension. In fact, we know of quite a few excellent spiritual traditions that cultivate an awareness of the absolute dimension, but without any notion of the definite absolute. Such traditions are, for instance, Buddhism and Daoism, and the beginnings of this orientation can also be found in some modern Western philosophical streams, such as existentialism, humanist Marxism, postmodernism, and Wittgenstein's philosophy.

Gandhi often gave religious meanings to the absolute dimension of existence, but he never tied it to only one religion, not even to his beloved Hinduism. We have seen that for

him only Truth was something absolute, something divine. By Truth he did not have in mind some abstract metaphysical entity, but the fundamental and unbreakable framework of our life and of every life, which gives it direction and holds up to us at every moment a mirror, in which we can see and incorruptibly judge ourselves and our actions.

However, the realisation of a radical humanity beyond all “humanist” ideologies requires the mutual integration of ethical virtues, respect for the freedom and dignity of all people, and the spiritual joy that emanates from an awareness of the absolute dimension of human existence. This is a task that certainly goes beyond any, however important, human activity and any particular form of consciousness. Every man can and must find his way to radical humanity. It is not so much about how far he reaches in this realisation, but rather whether he moves in the right direction.

Let us conclude this foreword with Gandhi’s words supporting my thought:

It is perfectly true, I must admit it in all humility, that however indifferently it may be, I endeavour to represent love in every fibre of my being. I am impatient to realize the presence of my Maker, who to me embodies Truth, and, in the early part of my career, I discovered that, if I was to realize Truth, I must obey, even at the cost of my life, the law of love. I do not propose to describe to you the several phases through which this stormy life of mine has passed; but I can only, in truth and in perfect humility, bear witness to the fact that to the extent that I have represented Love in my life, in thought, word, and deed, I have realized the ‘Peace that passed understanding’ I have baffled many of my friends when they have noticed in me peace that they have envied, and they have asked me for the cause of that priceless possession. I have not been able to explain the cause save by saying that, if my friends found that peace in me, it was due to an attempt to obey this, the greatest law of our being.⁴

Bibliography

- Gandhi, M. K. *Young India*, 11th August 1920. In: *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Prabhu, R. K., U. R. Rao Ahmedabad: Nanajivam Mudranalaya, 1945.
- Gandhi, M. K. *Young India*, 19th November 1931. In: *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Prabhu, R. K., U. R. Rao. Ahmedabad: Nanajivam Mudranalaya, 1945.
- Gandhi, M. K. “Democracy and Non-Violence”. In: *Selected Political Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996, 148–151.
- Gandhi, M. K. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments With Truth*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 2018.

4 Gandhi, *Young India*, 19th November 1931; in: Prabhu, R. K., U. R. Rao, ed. *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, 404.

Andrej Ule, PhD

Prof. Andrej Ule graduated in Technical mathematics at the Faculty of Sciences and Technology at the University of Ljubljana. In addition, he enrolled in the studies of philosophy during his study of mathematics. In 1982, he was appointed Assistant Professor for analytic philosophy and philosophy of science. He was granted the Humboldt scholarship at the Institute for Logic, Theory of Science and Statistics in Munich, where he studied the structural theory of science and the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In September and October 1995, he was a guest lecturer at the Augsburg College in Minneapolis in USA. He cooperates with many philosophers and philosophical institutions in Slovenia and abroad. Often, his research was inspired by Indian as well as Chinese philosophies and religions. He is also deeply inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, he is the author of a preface to Gandhi's autobiography in Slovene, published in 2018, titled *Avtobiografija. Zgodba o mojih eksperimentih z resnico* (*Autobiography. The Story of My Experiments with Truth*).