

## **Gandhi's solutions to today's problems**

*By John Avery*

If humans are ever to achieve a stable global society in the future, they will have to become much more modest in their economic behavior and much more peaceful in their politics. For both modesty and peace, Gandhi is a useful source of ideas. The problems with which he struggled during his lifetime are extremely relevant to us in the 21st Century, when both nuclear and ecological catastrophes threaten the world.

### **Avoiding the escalation of conflicts**

Today we read almost every day of killings that are part of escalating cycles of revenge and counter-revenge, for example in the Middle East. Gandhi's experiences both in South Africa and in India convinced him that such cycles could only be ended by unilateral acts of kindness and understanding from one of the parties in a conflict. He said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind".

### **Ends and means**

To the insidious argument that "the end justifies the means", Gandhi answered firmly: "They say that 'means are after all means'. I would say that 'means are after all everything'. As the means, so the end. Indeed, the Creator has given us limited power over means, none over end... The means may be likened to a seed, and the end to a tree; and there is the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree. Means and end are convertible terms in my philosophy of life."

### **Steps towards a nonviolent world**

Gandhi's advocacy of non-violence is closely connected to his attitude towards ends and means. He believed that violent methods for achieving a desired social result would inevitably result in an escalation of violence. The end achieved would always be contaminated by the methods used. He was influenced by Leo Tolstoy with whom he exchanged many letters, and he in turn influenced Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

### **The power of truth**

Gandhi was trained as a lawyer, and when he began to practice in South Africa, in his first case, he was able to solve a conflict by proposing a compromise that satisfied both parties. Of this result he said, "My joy was boundless. I had learnt the true practice of law. I had learnt to find out the better side of human nature and to enter men's hearts. I realized that the true function of a lawyer was to unite parties riven asunder." When Gandhi became involved with the struggle for civil rights of the Indian minority in South Africa, his background as a lawyer once more helped him. This time his jury was public opinion in England. When Gandhi led the struggle for reform, he insisted that the means of protest used by his followers should be non-violent, even

though violence was frequently used against them. In this way they won their case in the court of public opinion. Gandhi called this method of protest "satyagraha", a Sanscrit word meaning "the power of truth". In today's struggles for justice and peace, the moral force of truth and nonviolence can win victories in the court of world public opinion.

### **Harmony between religious groups**

Gandhi believed that at their core, all religions are based on the concepts of truth, love, compassion, nonviolence and the Golden Rule. When asked whether he was a Hindu, Gandhi answered, "Yes I am. I am also a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and a Jew." When praying at his ashram, Gandhi made a point of including prayers from many religions. One of the most serious problems that he had to face in his efforts to free India from British rule was disunity and distrust, even hate, between the Hindu and Muslim communities. Each community felt that with the British gone, they might face violence and repression from the other. Gandhi made every effort to bridge the differences and to create unity and harmony. His struggles with this problem are highly relevant to us today, when the world is split by religious and ethnic differences.

### **Solving the problem of unemployment**

In discussing the problem of unemployment in India's villages, Gandhi wrote: "Machinery has its place; it has come to stay. But it must not be allowed to displace necessary human labour. An improved plow is a good thing. But if, by some chance, one man could plow up, by some invention of his, the whole land of India, and control all the agricultural produce, and if the millions had no other occupation, they would starve, and being idle, they would become dunces, as many have already become. There is hourly danger of many being reduced to that unenviable state." Gandhi frequently worked to substitute social goals for the brutal laws of economic competition. He urged that in order to solve the problem of unemployment in rural India, villagers should stop buying imported cloth from England, and should instead spin and weave their own cloth. His spinning wheel was incorporated into the ag of the Congress Party, and ultimately it became part of the ag of an independent India.

### **Solidarity with the poor**

Today's world is characterized by intolerable economic inequalities, both between nations and within nations. 18 million of our fellow humans die each year from poverty-related causes. 1.1 billion people live on less than \$1 a day, 2.7 billion live on less than \$2. Gandhi's concern for the poor can serve as an example to us today, as we work to achieve a more equal world. He said, "There is enough for every man's need, but not for every man's greed."

### **Voluntary reduction of consumption**

After Gandhi's death, someone took a photograph of all his worldly possessions. It was a tiny heap, consisting of his glasses, a pair of sandals, a homespun cloth (his only garment) and a watch. That was all. By reducing his own needs and possessions to an ab-

solute minimum, Gandhi had tried to demonstrate that the commonly assumed connection between wealth and merit is false. This is relevant today, in a world where we face a crisis of diminishing resources. Not only fossil fuels, but also metals and arable land per capita will become scarce in the future. This will force a change in lifestyle, particularly in the industrialized countries, away from consumerism and towards simplicity. Gandhi's example can teach us that we must cease to use wealth and “conspicuous consumption” as a measure of merit.

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