

Martin Luther King Jr.'s use of nonviolence inspired by Gandhi

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American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta, both wearing garlands, are received by admirers after landing at the airport in New Delhi, India, in 1959. Photo by: AP Photo/R. Satakopan

Mahatma Gandhi was an activist in India. He helped lead India's independence movement in the early 1900s. Gandhi organized peaceful protests against British rule. He inspired people all over the world, including civil rights leaders in the United States. One of the most famous people he inspired was Martin Luther King Jr.

The two men never got a chance to meet. However, King learned about Gandhi through his writings and a trip to India in 1959. He drew heavily on the Gandhian idea of nonviolence in his own activism. King wrote that Gandhi was a "guiding light" for him.

Love Is The Key

"Nonviolence" is more than simply agreeing that you won't physically attack your enemy. Gandhi referred to his form of nonviolence as satyagraha. This means "truth-force" or "love-force." Practicing satyagraha means a person should seek truth and love. They should refuse to do

anything they believe is wrong. This idea guided Gandhi's activism against the British Empire, helping India win its freedom in 1947.

King first learned of Gandhi's idea of nonviolence when he was studying to become a minister, a Christian leader. King connected Gandhi's words to those of Jesus. In the Bible, Jesus tells his followers to "love your enemies."

King believed strongly in the Christian idea of love. He recognized this idea "operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence." This helped him realize that nonviolence could be a powerful weapon in the "struggle for freedom."

The Montgomery Bus Boycott

King was already familiar with the idea of peaceful protest. He liked Gandhi's idea that people could use truth or love to fight for justice. However, he didn't find a practical use for it until he became involved in the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956. At that time, the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, was segregated. African-Americans were forced to ride at the back of the bus. To protest this, King and others organized a boycott. For over a year, African-Americans refused to ride on Montgomery buses.

In his book "Stride Toward Freedom," King described the principles of nonviolence. He wrote that it is possible to resist evil without using violence. People who practice nonviolence must be willing to suffer without fighting back, even in their heart. "The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent," King wrote. "He also refuses to hate him."

Clayborne Carson is a history professor at Stanford University. King "saw [nonviolence] as an expression of love for all people," Carson says. "It's a way of reaching people and convincing them of the rightness of your cause."

In 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that Montgomery's bus segregation was unconstitutional. Shortly afterward, King spoke before a crowd in New York City. He said that "Christ showed us the way, and Gandhi in India showed it could work."

King Continued Gandhi's Work

King wasn't the only civil rights leader who looked to Gandhi for inspiration. Future lawmaker John Lewis was another. In the 1950s, Lewis studied Gandhi in nonviolence workshops. These workshops prepared him for the peaceful protests he would later lead in Tennessee.

In 1959, King went to India to learn more about Gandhi and his ideas. He was pleasantly surprised to find that many people there had followed the Montgomery bus boycott. During the trip, King met with Gandhi's son and other relatives. The experience strengthened his belief in nonviolent civil disobedience. King left India even more convinced of its power to affect social change.

After he returned to the United States, he became a major civil rights leader. King was the most important living supporter of nonviolence, Carson says. "He popularized a lot of the ideas that Gandhi had." Through King's actions and leadership, these ideas spread throughout the United States and the world.

Quiz

- 1 When did Gandhi's teachings about nonviolence lead to India gaining its independence? How do you know?
- (A) Early 1900s; He helped lead India's independence movement in the early 1900s.
 - (B) 1959; However, King learned about Gandhi through his writings and a trip to India in 1959.
 - (C) 1947; This idea guided Gandhi's activism against the British Empire, helping India win its freedom in 1947.
 - (D) 1955; However, he didn't find a practical use for it until he became involved in the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956.
- 2 Read the section "The Montgomery Bus Boycott."
- Which sentence from the section supports the conclusion that King's use of nonviolent protest in Alabama worked?
- (A) For over a year, African-Americans refused to ride on Montgomery buses.
 - (B) People who practice nonviolence must be willing to suffer without fighting back, even in their heart.
 - (C) King "saw [nonviolence] as an expression of love for all people," Carson says.
 - (D) In 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that Montgomery's bus segregation was unconstitutional.
- 3 Read the article's introduction [paragraphs 1-2] and its final section, "King Continued Gandhi's Work."
- What is one connection between these sections?
- (A) Both sections explain what caused Gandhi to use nonviolence to protest British rule in India.
 - (B) Both sections compare and contrast different activists who took their ideas for protest from Gandhi.
 - (C) The introduction summarizes Gandhi's inspiration of King and other activists, and the final section provides more detail about this.
 - (D) The introduction describes Gandhi's background and childhood, and the final section describes King's background and childhood.
- 4 The section "Love Is The Key" is mostly organized using cause and effect structure.
- Why did the author choose to use this structure?
- (A) to show how Gandhi's ideas about nonviolence influenced King
 - (B) to explain how Gandhi and King changed India over time
 - (C) to describe how King's use of nonviolence worked in the U.S.
 - (D) to introduce the need for protests against the British Empire