



SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM

## TEACHER CONCEPT PAPER NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION

Nonviolence as a means of effecting social change can be divided into two concepts: tactical and philosophical. Nonviolence may be no more than a tactic—a means to an end that may be altered if it fails. Or it may be *philosophical nonviolence*, the consequence of a deeply held philosophy, often grounded in formal theology or less systematic religious persuasion.

### Philosophical Nonviolence

At its core, philosophical nonviolence is a belief that injustice and the abettors of injustice must be overcome only through nonviolent actions, particularly those that are driven by love and girded with redemptive suffering. Whereas rejection of violence as a mode of behavior is generally associated with pacifism, philosophical nonviolence goes beyond pacifism. Where pacifism typically involves the refusal to take part in personal or socially organized forms of violence, such as war, philosophical nonviolence imposes a moral obligation to take positive action to resist a variety of moral evils.

*Thoreau.* The first modern writer to systematically formulate the idea that citizens have a moral obligation to undertake positive action to resist unconscionable state policy was the Massachusetts essayist, naturalist, poet, and philosopher Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). Thoreau’s seminal work on the subject was his *Resistance to Civil Government* (widely known as *Civil Disobedience*, published in 1849).

Thoreau asserts that individuals should see themselves as human beings first and subjects to law second. Regard for what is right should precede regard for law. Conscience provides a “higher law” to which the morally upright citizen must have recourse. Thoreau further argues that it is not enough that citizens refrain from taking part in injustice; they must also *take positive action to separate themselves from the state’s injustice—to resist* the state actively through noncooperation. In pursuit of his principles, Thoreau refused to pay his taxes, which, he argued, supported slavery (however indirectly) and what he considered an unjust war, and willingly went to jail.

*Gandhi.* More than half a century later, an Indian leader in South Africa, Mohandas K. Gandhi, called Mahatma (“Great Soul”), formulated and applied his own action-oriented philosophical principles on the basis of Hindu philosophy and religion. Gandhi, a London-educated lawyer, became a close student of the central message of Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience* after reading it in 1907 in South Africa, where he led a nonviolent campaign against oppressive government.

Gandhi espoused a number of principles that were derived from Hindu philosophy and religion, as well as influenced by Thoreau and other Western thinkers. One of Gandhi’s two main principles was *satya*, translated imprecisely as “truth.” Part of truth is moral law, which is its basis. The other was *ahimsa*, or “nonviolence,” another imprecise

translation. Ahimsa includes the idea that one must take positive action to achieve a nonviolent state of affairs on earth, just as Thoreau had argued that moral citizens must actively separate themselves from the state's unjust practices. Ahimsa is also a deep expression of love for every human person. Thus participants in authentic nonviolent (ahimsa) struggles, which are based on the demands of conscience, must sincerely love their opponents and seek to win them over, not crush or abuse them.

*Satyagraha*, the Hindu name for the nonviolent struggles Gandhi led, embodied this practical application of idealism. The purpose of Satyagraha is social change; those who participate in it engage in self-transformation. In Gandhi's view, human beings are fundamentally good, and society can evolve toward a completely nonviolent social, economic, and political order.

*King*. The philosophy that underlay the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) was rooted in his intense Christian religiosity. This religiosity combined his experience in traditional black churches of the American South with the theological and philosophical learning he acquired while studying for the ministry. As a young man, he read and was greatly impressed by Thoreau. The conduct of his crusade against racial oppression was deeply influenced by the ideas and practices of Gandhi, whose family he visited in the late 1950s. "Christ gave us the goals," King explained, "and Mahatma Gandhi the tactics." Later he added, "I firmly believe that the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolent resistance is the only logical and moral approach to...the race problem in the United States."

King had developed his philosophy by 1955, when the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott thrust him into leadership. A key characteristic both of King's philosophy and the manner in which he espoused it is its energy. Drawing on Gandhi, he declared that nonviolent resistance to injustice is not a form of cowardice (Gandhi had said that he would even prefer violence to cowardice.) Its hallmark is *active* resistance to evil. Physically nonaggressive, the nonviolent resister is "strongly spiritually aggressive." In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, King stressed that nonviolence is not "sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation."

Also following Gandhi, King conceived the aim of nonviolent resistance not as the defeat or humiliation of opponents but winning them over to friendship and understanding—to reconciliation in a newly created community. Violence, by contrast, inevitably leaves bitterness in its wake. King also distinguished "external" from "internal" violence and insisted that nonviolent resisters must cleanse themselves of the inner violence of the spirit and adopt a philosophy of love—which, in his conception, stood at the center of his movement as its foundation. One "loves" others not because they are likable "but because God loves them," allowing them to be loved even when their actions are hateful.

Central to King's view of the person is the idea of human dignity. Nonviolent resisters find dignity in their struggle, regardless of their treatment. The opposite of dignity is degradation—the lowering (degrading) of the person to the status of an animal or a thing. This concern was central to his concepts of justice and injustice. "Any law that degrades

human personality,” he wrote in the *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, “is unjust. All segregation laws are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality.”

*Chavez.* Other famous leaders have followed in the footsteps of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King and his associates. Among Americans bearing mention is Cesar Chavez (1927–1993), cofounder of the United Farm Workers, whose work organizing farm workers improved their situation markedly. His nonviolent tactics were based on his knowledge of the philosophy of Gandhi, introduced to him as a young man by a Catholic priest, and of King, with whom he gained a close rapport in King’s latter days. To further his objectives, Chavez undertook Gandhi-inspired fasts for weeks at a time; organized unions, led marches and demonstrations; and held nationwide farm produce boycotts. In 1988, at age 61, his “Fast for Life,” protesting the effects of pesticides on farm workers and their children, continued for 36 days.

### **Tactical Nonviolence and Nonviolent Tactics**

Tactical nonviolence refers to the use of nonviolent methods or strategies to advance political or social goals by those who may or may not be adherents of philosophical nonviolence. Advocates of tactical nonviolence may reserve the right to change tactics if nonviolence is unsuccessful. The absence of complete commitment to nonviolence backed by a systematic philosophy is a key distinction between tactical and philosophical nonviolence.

The panoply of nonviolent tactics themselves is available to both groups. These tactics vary widely and include such well-known practices as civil disobedience (breaking the law; for example, in illegal sit-ins, encampments, or blockades, and accepting reasonable punishment); hunger strikes and fasting, boycotts, hanging banners, street demonstrations and street theater, telephone and media campaigns, petitions, negotiation, strikes, and walkouts, among others.

Nonviolent tactics evolve constantly. A recent innovation in China and Singapore, which lack freedom of assembly, is “strolling.” Protestors organize street walks protesting some policy, skirting restrictions that ban public gatherings. Elsewhere in the world, activists engage in Internet blogging and communicate through Facebook to promote their causes. In Iran, Kuwait, and elsewhere, protestors use texting and Twittering. In Egypt, election fraud might be broadcast in real time on the Internet. In India, corruption protestors have passed out zero-rupee “banknotes.” Other examples abound.