

# Martin Luther King and Nonviolence

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# Martin Luther King and Nonviolence

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## Roots of Nonviolence

Martin Luther King often reflected on his understanding of nonviolence. He described his own “pilgrimage to nonviolence” in his writings. “True pacifism,” or “nonviolent resistance,” King wrote, is “a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love”. Both “morally and practically” committed to nonviolence, King believed that “the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom”.

King stated that he was first introduced to the concept of nonviolence when he read Henry David Thoreau’s *Essay on Civil Disobedience* as a freshman at Morehouse College. Having grown up in Atlanta and witnessed segregation and racism every day, King was “fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system”.

As a student at Crozer Theological Seminary, King heard a talk by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University. Dr. Johnson, who had recently traveled to India, spoke about the life and teachings of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi, King later wrote, was the first person to transform Christian love into a powerful force for social change. Gandhi’s stress on love and nonviolence gave King “the method for social reform that I had been seeking”.



## Nonviolence in Practice

While intellectually committed to nonviolence, King did not experience the power of nonviolent direct action first-hand until the start of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. During the boycott, King personally enacted Gandhian principles.

**King’s notion of nonviolence had six key principles.**

1. One can resist evil without resorting to violence.
2. Nonviolence seeks to win the “friendship and understanding” of the opponent, not to humiliate him.
3. Evil itself, not the people committing evil acts, should be opposed.
4. Those committed to nonviolence must be willing to suffer without retaliation as suffering itself can be redemptive.
5. Nonviolent resistance avoids “external physical violence” and “internal violence of spirit” as well:
  - a. “The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him.”
  - b. The resister should be motivated by love in the sense of the Greek word *agape*, which means “understanding,” or “redeeming good will for all men.”
6. The nonviolent resister must have a “deep faith in the future,” stemming from the conviction that “the universe is on the side of justice.”

## The King Timeline

MLK Timeline	
<b>1955</b>	Joins the bus boycott after Rosa Parks was arrested. Becomes the official spokesman for the boycott.
<b>1958</b>	Congress passed the first Civil Rights Act since reconstruction. On a speaking tour, Martin Luther King, Jr. is nearly killed when stabbed in Harlem.
<b>1959</b>	Visited India to study Mohandas Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence. Is arrested for demonstrating without a permit. During the eleven days he spent in jail, MLK writes <i>Letter from Birmingham Jail</i>
<b>1963</b>	March on Washington held August 28 is the largest civil rights demonstration in history with nearly 250,000 people. King makes his <i>I Have a Dream</i> speech. President Kennedy is assassinated.
<b>1964</b>	Attends the signing ceremony of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 at the White House. Stoned by Black Muslims in Harlem. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
<b>1965</b>	King turns to socioeconomic problems. Marches in support of sanitation workers on strike in Memphis, Tennessee. Leads a march that turns violent. The first time one of his events had turned violent. Delivered <i>I've Been to the Mountaintop</i> speech.
<b>1968</b>	At sunset on April 4, Martin Luther King, Jr. is fatally shot while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. There are riots and disturbances in 130 American cities: twenty thousand arrests. King's funeral is an international event.

## **Committed to Nonviolence**

During the years after the bus boycott, King grew increasingly committed to nonviolence. An India trip in 1959 helped him connect more intimately with Gandhi's legacy. King began to advocate nonviolence not just in a national sphere, but internationally as well.

***“THE POTENTIAL DESTRUCTIVENESS OF  
MODERN WEAPONS” convinced King that  
“THE CHOICE TODAY IS NO LONGER  
BETWEEN VIOLENCE AND NONVIOLENCE.  
IT IS EITHER NONVIOLENCE OR  
NONEXISTENCE”***

After Black Power advocates such as Stokely Carmichael began to reject nonviolence, King lamented that some African Americans had lost hope, and reaffirmed his own commitment to nonviolence: “Occasionally in life one develops a conviction so precious and meaningful that he will stand on it till the end. This is what I have found in nonviolence” (Reddick).

He wrote in his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*: “We maintained the hope while transforming the hate of traditional revolutions into positive nonviolent power. As long as the hope was fulfilled there was little questioning of nonviolence. But when the hopes were blasted, when people came to see that in spite of progress their conditions were still insufferable ... despair began to set in”. (Running 23-34) Arguing that violent revolution was impractical in the context of a multiracial society, he concluded that: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. The beauty of nonviolence is that in its own way and in its own time it seeks to break the chain reaction of evil”.

## **King's Trip to India**

From the early days of the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to India's Mahatma Gandhi as “the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change.” Following the success of the boycott in 1956, King contemplated traveling to India to deepen his understanding of Gandhian principles.

That same year, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's prime minister, made a short visit to the United States. Although unable to arrange a meeting with King, Nehru made inquiries through his diplomatic representatives concerning the possibility of King visiting India in the future. King secured funds for his trip to India.

On 3 February 1959, King, his wife, Coretta Scott King, and Lawrence Reddick, began a five week tour of India. King told a group of reporters gathered at the airport, “To other countries I may go as a tourist, but to India I come as a pilgrim.”

## **In India**

Throughout their visit, they received invitations to hundreds of engagements. “Almost every door was open so that our party was able to see some of India’s most important social experiments and talk with leaders in and out of Government, ranging from Prime Minister Nehru to village councilmen and Vinoba Bhave, the sainted leader of the land reform movement.”

King’s popularity in India revealed the extent to which the Montgomery bus boycott had been covered in India and throughout the world. (Reddick) “We were looked upon as brothers with the color of our skins as something of an asset,” King recalled. “But the strongest bond of fraternity was the common cause of minority and colonial peoples in America, Africa and Asia struggling to throw off racialism and imperialism.”

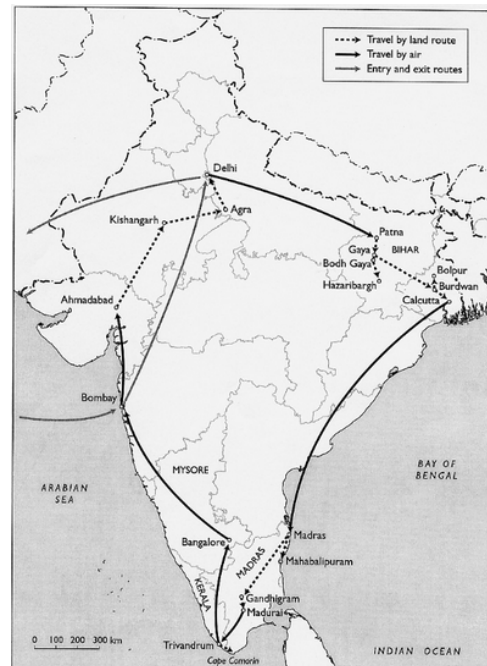
He observed that although India was rife with poverty, overpopulation, and unemployment, the country nonetheless had a low crime rate and strong spiritual quality. Moreover, the bourgeoisie—whether white, black, or brown—had similar opportunities.

Gandhians accepted King openly and praised him for his efforts, which they looked upon as an example of the potential of nonviolence outside of India. These experiences reinforced King’s belief in the power of nonviolent resistance and its potential usefulness throughout the world—even against totalitarian regimes.

## **Back Again**

Upon his return from India, King compared the discrimination of India’s untouchables with America’s race problems, noting that India’s leaders publicly endorsed integration laws. “This has not been done so largely in America,” King wrote. He added, “today no leader in India would dare to make a public endorsement of untouchability. But in America, every day some leader endorses racial segregation.”

King’s trip to India had a profound influence on his understanding of nonviolent resistance and his commitment to America’s struggle for civil rights. King reflected: “since being in India, I am more convinced than ever before that the method of nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for justice and human dignity. In a real sense, Mahatma Gandhi embodied in his life certain universal principles that are inherent in the moral structure of the universe, and these principles are as inescapable as the law of gravitation.”



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