

Overcoming the Illusory divide between Nonviolence as Pragmatic Strategy and as Lifestyle

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Description: A divide exists between those who hold nonviolence as a way of life and those who advocate it as a technique, which is to say a pragmatic strategy; this split often leads to problems such as miscommunication and, at times, non-cooperation among people who work hard for nonviolent social change. This paper suggests that the demarcation drawn between nonviolence as a way of life and as a pragmatic strategy is, indeed, illusory. Analysis begins with understanding the tool dimensionality of nonviolence as advanced in the Robert Burrowes study. It shows that those who are seen as practitioners of nonviolence as a way of life—especially Gandhi and Dr. King—are pragmatic nonviolent strategists.

Keywords: ahimsa, Birmingham, civilian based defenses policy, Dr. King, Gandhi, Gene Sharp, non-cooperation, Jain religion of India, Johan Galtung, nonviolence as a policy, nonviolence discourse, nonviolent social change, pragmatic nonviolent strategists, pragmatic strategist, principled nonviolence, reformist revolution nonviolence, sara, satyagraha, SCLC, The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action, The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense, unity of humankind

In late 1993, a band of villagers formed themselves into a human barrier around the electricity generating authority of Thailand's hydroelectric dam construction site. They did this to call for fair compensation after being forcibly evicted from their land. In February 1994, poor Thai farmers engaged in a long march from their northeastern provinces to Bangkok to vent their dissatisfaction with their impoverished conditions. Then, in July 1994, demonstrators used yellow flags with the word nonviolence in their political protests in the streets of Bangkok. These incidents, among others, prompted some Thai journalists to probe the true meaning of nonviolence. Some of the activists who interviewed maintained that nonviolence is, at once:

- supposed to be taken to as a way of life,
- most meaningful when it starts from inside oneself, and
- a discipline along the line of Buddhist religious precepts.^[1]

Distinguishing between qualified and unqualified nonviolence, an editor of a textbook on nonviolence suggests that a commitment to nonviolence will be unqualified if the nonviolent practitioner renounces the use of violence in any circumstances whatsoever and follows a way of life for such as the one upheld by the Jain religion of India, for example.^[2] Gene Sharp, perhaps the most prominent theorist of nonviolence, tried to clear several misconceptions about nonviolence, among other things, a widely held belief about the necessity to practice nonviolence with a spiritual basis or a belief in nonviolence as a way of life. Sharp maintained that people do not need certain religious beliefs or religious experiences before they can use the nonviolent method.^[3]

The division between those who hold nonviolence as a way of life and those who advocate it as a technique, which is to say a pragmatic strategy, has often lead to problems such as miscommunication and, at times, non-cooperation among people who work hard for nonviolent social change. This paper suggests that the demarcation drawn between nonviolence as a way of life and as a pragmatic strategy is, indeed, illusory. My analysis will begin with an understanding of the tool dimensionality of nonviolence as advanced in Robert Burrowes fine study.^[4] Then, I will show that those who are seen as practitioners of nonviolence as a way of life—especially Gandhi and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—are also pragmatic nonviolent strategists.

Finally, analyzing the linguistic and strategic dimensions of those seem to be practitioners of nonviolence as a pragmatic strategy, I will argue that they are in some ways living a life committed to the politics of nonviolence. A brief discussion of a need for a discursive transformation from violence to nonviolence will be advanced.

The Duel Dimensionality of Nonviolence

In *The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense*, Robert J. Burrowes classifies four major categories of nonviolence by using two sets of continuum:

1. the principled pragmatic continuum: indicates the nature of commitment to nonviolence and the approach to conflict that activists utilizes, notably the ability to separate means from ends and the attitude towards the opponent, and
2. the reformist revolution continuum reflects the way these conflicts are analyzed: as a policy problem or a structural problem in which the ultimate aim is change in policy or a structure, the presence or absence of a constructive program, and the operational time-frame used by practitioners of nonviolence.^[5]

The principled vis-à-vis the pragmatic continuum is the focus of this paper. The following is the important criteria that Burrowes used to distinguish principled from pragmatic nonviolence:

Principled practitioners choose nonviolence for its superior ethic, while

Pragmatic practitioners choose nonviolence because it is the most effective method available, while

Principled practitioners maintain the indivisibility between ends and means, while

Pragmatists hold that they are separable.

Principled practitioners view conflict of the shared problem; thus, they view opponents as partners in the struggle for satisfying the needs of all, while

Pragmatic practitioners, in contrast, view conflict as a relationship between antagonists who have incompatible interests.

Principled practitioners of nonviolence, because they see their opponents as partners in a process, choose to endure suffering rather than lose points after having suffered, while

Pragmatic practitioners, by contrast, intend to defeat the opponents; thus, suffering inflicted as the appliance short of physical injury is considered acceptable, and, therefore,

Principled practitioners may view nonviolence as a way of life—pragmatic practitioners do not.⁶

The term principled nonviolence in the Burrowes' usage is somewhat problematic because it is possible that some will choose nonviolent action after assessing their own situation based on principled pragmatism.^[7] On the other hand, if one is to practice nonviolence as *a way of life*, one has to follow at least three principles:

1. Nonviolent action is chosen because of its ethical superiority.
2. Only nonviolent means will be conducive to the creation of a society free of violence as: a) direct, b) structural, and c) cultural—by way of the methodology of Johan Galtung,^[8] and
3. The purpose of the fight is not to defeat the so-called other side because they are partners and not opponents. To see the so-called others as partners is a crucial step toward the notion of the unity of humankind.

In fact, upon closer inspection, I see that these three principles are linked via ethics. Practitioners of nonviolence as a way of life will choose to endure suffering instead of violence upon others because of their belief in the unity and/or linked nature of humankind. Violence will either disrupt or undermine the unity and, therefore, is to be avoided as a matter of ethical principle. Thus, only nonviolent means should be used because of its ethical consistency and, therefore, advantage. I will now examine whether Gandhi and Reverend Dr. King Jr.—regarded as exemplars of nonviolence as a way of life—did also ground their nonviolent actions on pragmatic action pragmatic/strategic excellence.

The Nonviolent Saints as Pragmatic Strategists?

Gandhi used the term *satyagraha*: truth force to join truth: *sarya* with nonviolence: *ahimsa*. He then identified its three basis characteristics:

- Endurance through suffering,
- Adhere to the consistency between the means and the ends, and
- Exercise non-cooperation when facing an unjust political/ social system.^[9]

Satyagraha is a way to achieve what a group wants from another. Instead, it is a way to remove the oppression and injustice, which is both cruel to the oppressed and corrupting to the spirit of the oppressor, so that social harmony can be restored for the benefit of both sides. Some argue that Gandhi's contribution is his integration of a high moral principle or spirit with mass political struggle.^[10] In this sense, these three features of Gandhi's credo of nonviolence can be regarded as ethical imperatives for nonviolence as a way of life, similar to the Burrowes' criteria for the principled nonviolence as shown above.

However, in an important study by Gene Sharp, Gandhi's qualities as a political strategist is carefully examined and underscored. Extensive citing from mainly Gandhi's writings, Sharp maintains that Gandhi neither demanded perfect nonviolence nor thought it possible. Instead, he insisted that one strive toward the least imperfection and inconsistency.^[10] Contrary to what many believe, Sharp cited Gandhi's writings published in his *Nonviolence is Peace and War* to show

Gandhi's insistence that his main contribution was to offer people a technique with which they could cope with their social and political problems.^[12] In 1920, Gandhi wrote:

Being a practical man, I do not wait until India recognizes the that the spiritual life in the political world is a practical necessity. India considers herself powerless and paralyzed ... and takes up non-cooperation via her weakness. It must still serve the same purpose, namely: bring her delivery from the crushing weight off British injustice if a sufficient number of people practice it.^[13]

Gandhi called this type of nonviolent action: *nonviolence as a policy*, which can given up on due notice when it proves ineffective. He wrote:

A policy may be changed, though a creed cannot be changed. Nevertheless, either is as good as the other whilst it is held.^[14]

Some scholars suggest that Gandhi later abandoned his nonviolence as a policy and admitted that it was a failure to adopt nonviolence as a matter of political expediency.^[15] However, Sharp pointed out that Gandhi's own letter to the British Government of India as late as 1943, he wrote:

I do not at all need believers in the theory of nonviolence, full or imperfect. It is enough if people carry out the rules of nonviolent action.^[16]

Viewing satyagraha as a technique, Joan Bondurant was careful in her analysis of these five satyagraha campaigns as the:

1. Vykom Temple road satyagraha in 1924-25,
2. Bardoli campaign of peasants against the government of Bombay in 1928,
3. Ahmedabad labor campaign in 1918,
4. nationwide campaign against the Rowlatt Bills in 1919, and
5. salt satyagraha in 1930-31.

She concluded that most of the participants in the campaigns were using nonviolence not as a way of life but rather to achieve specific objectives. As she wrote, "Gandhi's nonviolence was chosen because of its efficacy as a method. For most of those involved, nonviolence was a policy, not a creed."^[17] In fact, Gandhi's longtime secretary, Pyarelal told Bondurant that

It is possible to run a satyagraha campaign with people who have no faith in nonviolence as a creed if they follow the rules as a discipline and work under the leadership of unadulterated nonviolence.^[18]

For Gandhi, nonviolence is more practical than some of the Gandhians believe. Operating with the domain of social and political reality, Gandhi's nonviolence is neither one-dimensional nor

exclusivist. His own nonviolence can differ from the nonviolence he advocated for others. His campaign did have space for those who regarded nonviolence different than he did. In fact, Gandhi's nonviolence, as applied sociopolitical action, does require a comprehensive program of planning, preparation, and execution based on close study. Participants in campaigns based upon nonviolence believe in it as a way of life. They simply have to follow rules enunciated by Gandhi and his organizers as though they were using technical instructions, i.e., Gandhi's nonviolence does not categorically follow nonviolent ethical imperatives. At times, he did employ practical imperatives that his followers used. In this sense, one can consider nonviolence a pragmatic strategy as well as a way of life. We know that the legacy of Gandhi lives within Dr. King's nonviolent action.^[19] I will show King's nonviolence in terms of strategy vis-à-vis Gandhi.

According to the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, six principles of nonviolence are derived from Dr. King's *Stride toward Freedom* (1958).^[20] The practice of nonviolence ...

- is a way of life for courageous people
- seeks to win friendship and understanding
- seeks to defeat injustice, not people
- holds the belief that suffering can educate and transform
- chooses love instead of hate, and
- holds the belief that the universe is aligned with justice.

Judging from these principles, which, again, are not unlike Burrowes'^[5] criteria of principled nonviolence, Dr. King can, by definition, be placed in the way-of-life group. However, an interesting biography, which seeks to assess Dr. King's techniques, writings, and leadership seem to suggest that we reposition King's place into the way-of-life/pragmatic-strategy continuum.

James Colaiaco begins his biography of King, the activist in a unique way: "Martin Luther King Jr. ranks among the greatest political strategists of all time." With careful analysis of King's many campaigns and based on extensive research, Colaiaco brought about a different portrait of King. Reverend King asked Wyatt Walker, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership: SCLC "...to find some way to create a crisis in Birmingham."^[22]

Thus, on April 7, 1963, twenty-five Blacks as demonstrators walked toward downtown Birmingham and were met by the Chief of Police, Bull Connor, who brought along attack dogs. When one of the dogs lunged onto a spectator, who tried to defend himself with a knife, the police charged the crowd with clubs and allowed two more dogs to attack. When the organizers at the SCLC, headquarters heard about what happened, they said, "We've got a movement. We had some police brutality. They brought the dogs onto us."^[23] Thus, the organizers were elated because the police had cooperated in creating an incident that inspired the press to give coverage for the protest.

Upon assessing several of King's campaigns in the South, Colaiaco suggests that the major victories against racist segregation in the South have these defining factors:

- Dr. King and his colleagues created dramatic crises by provoking the racism of the police to react to peaceful protest with violence,
- the organizers secured news media attention to the plight of Blacks in the U.S., and thus,
 - ◊ they gained the support of and mobilized hitherto complacent groups and the public, in general, and
- as a result, local authorities were compelled to bargain while the Federal Government had to intervene against the aggressor.

Echoing Machiavelli's advice in *Il Principe*, Colaiaco concludes that, "While Dr. King appeared to be the lamb, his nonviolent strategy embodied much of the power of the lion and the cleverness of the fox."^[24] It seems clear that from Colaiaco's study that ethical imperatives were not the only considerations that King chose to follow. Practical assessment of current situations and well-planned strategy did play major role in most of his nonviolent campaigns. In this sense, Gandhi and King's qualities as pragmatic strategists seem to be evident. However, the point here is not to suggest that both nonviolent leaders disregard nonviolence as a way of life. Instead, I argue that in light of the above discussion, since they also elicit pragmatic/strategic qualities, the demarcation line drawn between nonviolence as a way of life and as a pragmatic strategy in their lives may be less solid than previously thought about. It remains to be seen how strong this line of demarcation on the side of nonviolent pragmatic strategists.

Pragmatic Strategists as Saints

In 1988, a scholar compared Gandhi, King, and Gene Sharp as three paradigms of nonviolence. He suggested that Sharp is different from the two political leaders because he is not in the field mobilizing a vast social movement. It is the difference between Sharp's reflection and action-reflection of King and Gandhi.^[25] Galtung, on the other hand, considers Sharp as the major representative of the pragmatics of nonviolence rather than the spirituality of nonviolence as represented by the Gandhian tradition.^[26] I would agree with Galtung and use Sharp as a representative of the nonviolent pragmatic strategist to explore the extent of his commitment to nonviolence as a way of life.

In *The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action*, Sharp discusses three major issues which seem to suggest that the pragmatic strategist is indeed committed to nonviolence as a way of life. They are:

1. The problems about mixing violent with nonviolent actions,
2. The need for discipline, and

3. The refusal to hate.^[27]

1. Problems about mixing violent with nonviolent actions: Sharp considers this issue under the heading: sabotage because for him sabotage is violent act against property. Yet, they could bring injury or death to persons or threaten to do so. Sharp gives a number of reasons to support the claim that sabotage will weaken nonviolent action. Some of these reasons include:

- They risk unintentional physical violence to opponents or bystanders,
- Once death or violence occurs, likely a relative loss of sympathy and support for nonviolent protagonists will occur; nonviolent action is based upon a challenge in human terms by human beings to other human beings while sabotage relies on physical destruction, and
- Both methods are rooted in quite different premises about how the power of an opponent can be undermined.

The idea that sabotage and, I would add, other forms of violence is compatible with nonviolent action must be rejected as either false accusation of uninformed critics, or as a highly dangerous proposal of action likely to disrupt the processes, which could bring strength and victory."^[28]

This is in fact in line with one of the lessons learned from studying nonviolent resisters in the twentieth century that a movement's ability to thrive degenerates when it uses violence, which will in turn, lead to intensified repression.^[29]

2. The need for discipline: Sharp maintains that if nonviolent struggle is to persist in face of repression, to remain nonviolent, and to carry through the campaign, discipline among the nonviolent practitioners is required. In fact, without discipline, the effective use of nonviolent as a technique will become "very difficult or impossible."^[30] It should be noted that discipline in nonviolence action is "self discipline and inner discipline."^[31] Where discipline in a nonviolent struggle is weak or absent, it can easily slip into violent and thus undermines existing legitimacy of nonviolent groups.

3. Refusal to hate: Sharp points out that his theory of nonviolence does not require its practitioners to love their opponents. Nevertheless, he suggests that the effectiveness of nonviolent technique may be increased if the practitioners can refrain from hatred and hostility. An absence of ill will may increase the likelihood of the conversion mechanism to take place and win over the hearts of the opponents. Alternatively, when one fights a state apparatus with nonviolence, an absence of hatred or hostility can help undermine the loyalty of the police and troops. As a result, their efficiency in carrying out orders to deal with the people who used non-violent actions might very well be reduced.^[32]

From these three factors, I deduce that Sharp's nonviolence has some of the qualities of someone who practices nonviolence as a way of life especially in its strong and strict commitment to use

nonviolent methods only, not to harm others, and to try not to hate the opponents. In fact, for a pragmatic strategist who bases his nonviolence theory on the consent theory of power and legitimacy, not to strongly adhere to a disciplined nonviolence will rob its users of all legitimacy. The opponents will then respond with violence that can be seen as legitimate. This, in turn, will make the withdrawal of consent by the general populace much more difficult. In addition, loyalty to nonviolent struggle will enhance the strategists' ability to optimize the complete range of available nonviolent alternatives.^[33] In other words, while ethical imperatives are not present for the pragmatic strategists, the theoretical, pragmatic imperative requires that he or she must be committed to nonviolence or risk becoming just another ordinary pragmatic strategist, not one who uses nonviolence. The line between nonviolence as a pragmatic strategy and the way of life seems more illusory than real.

Conclusion: toward a Discourse about Nonviolence

Gandhi and King's successes as nonviolent leaders can be attributed to the fact that they do not merely practice nonviolence as a way of life. They are also keen pragmatic nonviolent strategists. For a pragmatic nonviolent strategist, such as Sharp, who works in the political sphere determined, among the other things, by theoretical, linguistic and strategic dimensions, not to commit to nonviolent actions will compromise his work as an advocate of nonviolent actions. A pragmatic nonviolent strategist cannot claim to be nonviolent or work effectively for nonviolent social change, if the consistent use of the language of nonviolence or if the strategist does not commit to the use of nonviolent action without reservation. This goes on to show that the demarcation line drawn between those who regard nonviolence as a way of life and those who consider their nonviolence to be both pragmatic and strategic is indeed illusory.

Existing discursive practices turn violence into appropriate human behaviors. The way in which violence is used and normalized at the interpersonal and international level suggests the hegemony of the discourse of violence. If a step towards a peaceful, nonviolent society is to begin with a serious questioning of the dominant discourse of violence to create a counter-discourse of nonviolence,^[34] then the step has to be taken by practitioners of nonviolence on both sides of the blurring line.

Reference

* I revised this paper from my article published in Italy as "Nonvioleza Pragmatica e Nonviolenza per Principio: Una Contrapposizione Illusoria" in *My Islam e Nonvioleza*. Edizione Gruppo Abele, Torino 1997, pp. 64-84

1. Varaporn Chamsanit, "Responding with Words Not Whips." *The Nation Magazine*, 07/29/94), p C1-C2

2. See *Nonviolence in Theory and Practice*. Holmes, Robert L. (ed.), Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, CA: 1990, p2. See I. C. Sharma, "The Ethics of Jainism," pp 10-13 in the same volume; see Tobias, Michael. *Life Force: the World of Jainism*. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991, especially Chapter 3

3. See Gene Sharp, "*Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Nonviolent Struggle toward Justice, Freedom, and Peace*," in *Violence and Its Alternatives: an Interdisciplinary Reader*. (Manfred Steger and Nancy Lind, eds.) New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, pp. 320-321; and Gene Sharp, "Nonviolent Struggle: an Effective Alternative," in *Inner Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*. (Kenneth Kraft ed.) New York: State University of New York Press, 1992, pp. 114. Gene Sharp does not use the term nonviolence, as I do here; he uses the terms *nonviolent actions*, *nonviolent resistance*, or *nonviolent struggle*.

4. See Robert Burrowes, *The Strategy of Nonviolence Defense: a Gandhi Approach*. New York: State University of New York press, 1996.

5. Ibid., pp. 98–101. In an earlier writing, which Burrowes coauthored, the two axes are somewhat different. The first continuum is from *pragmatic to ideological*, while the second is from *tactical to strategic*. In addition, some criteria used for addressing both axis is in the text cited here such as the presence of the absence of constructive program or nonviolence is a way of life did not appear. See, Burrowes, "Nonviolence: An Introduction" *Peace Dozier #27* (a publication of the Victorian Association of his Studies February, 1991) page 1-2. In my view, this is perhaps one of the best short introductions to study of nonviolence.

6. Burrowes, *The Strategy of Nonviolence Defense*..

7. Burrowes sees the problematic nature of principled nonviolence. See Ibid, page 294, fn. 13 derived from Burrowes' five criteria.

8. See Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*. London: SAGE; Oslo: PRIO, 1996, pp 31-33.

9. Michael Salla, "Satyagraha in Mahatma Gandhi's Political Philosophy," in *Peace Research*. Vol. 25, # 1 February, 1993, p. 39-62, especially p. 50-55.

10. Mark Shepard, *Gandhi Today: a Report on Mahama Gandhi's Successors*. Arcata, CA: Simple Productions, 1987, p. 5

11. Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist: Essays about Ethics and Politics*..

12. Ibid. p. 277

13. Quoted in Ibid. p. 276
14. Quoted in Ibid.
15. Salla, *Satyagraha in Mahatma Gandhi's Political Philosophy*, p. 52
16. Quoted in Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, p. 279
17. Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: the Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*. Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1967, p.45-103. The quotes are on p. 103
18. Quoted in Ibid, pp. 103-104
19. See, for example, Sean Chabot, "A Culture of Peace in Motion: Transcendental Diffusion of the Gandhian Repertoire from India to the U.A. Civil Rights Movement" in *Peace Research* Vol. 33 # 1, May 2001, p. 29-36.
20. See "Six Principles of Nonviolence", in The King Center, pamphlet via Atlanta, Georgia: Martin Luther King Jr. Estate and Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., 1989.
21. See James A. Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King Jr. : Apostle of Militant Nonviolence*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993, p. 1
22. Ibid, p. 56
23. Quoted in Ibid, p. 60
24. Ibid, p.143
25. Donovan E. Smucker, "Mobandas' Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Gene Sharp: three paradigms of Non- Violence" presented at the Symposia on Nonviolence, University of Wisconsin at-Eau Claire, 10/88.
26. Johan Galtung,*Peace by Peaceful Means*. fn. 20, p. 126.
27. Gene Sharp and Porter Sergeant, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action: Part Three: The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action*. Boston, 1973, p. 608-635.
28. Ibid, p. 614. Sharp seems to alter his position in discussion of civilian-based defense because he argues in Gene Sharp, *Civilian-Based Defense: A Post Military Weapon System*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, that a civilian-based defense component can be added to a policy that is largely based upon military. Such a nonviolent component might later be increased, reduced, or eliminated depending on future assessments of its deterrence and defense capacity p.

131. Here is not the place to fully analyze Sharp's contention. Suffice it to suggest that he regards CBD as very different than other nonviolent actions, he has now changed his 1973 position, or he has so much confidence in CBD as to believe that the military component will, ultimately, be undermined. He did discuss" potential benefits of the Civilian Based Defenses Policy" in the last part of his book, p. 143-148.

29. Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall, *A Force More Powerful*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
30. Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action (part three)*, p. 615.
31. Ibid., p. 616.
32. Ibid., p. 633-634
33. Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: the Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century*. Westport, CN: Praeger, 1994, p. 42-45
34. Chaiwat Satha-Anand, "From Violent to Nonviolent Discourse" in (Elise Boulding ed.) *Peace Culture & Society: Transnational Research and Dialogue*. Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford: Westview 1991, pp. 124-132.

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