

Life and work of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)

Introduction

The grandfather of servant-leadership, Robert Greenleaf, said: ‘the servant-leader is servant first. Becoming a servant-leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first’. Well, Gandhi desired to serve first. Why? Because selfless service is a source of joy, or because service is meant for self-realization as he wrote in his biography? We’ll see. He was a motivated leader, not by a desire to control others, but by a desire to help millions of people realize their dignity and power. Gandhi never proclaimed himself a leader. He served as a catalyst and example, providing vision and inspiring hope.

In this workshop about *life and work of Mahatma Gandhi*, I would like to relate my presentation to two characteristics as key attributes of Servant-Leadership, and to one of the dilemmas of servant-leadership.

These key attributes of servant-leadership are:

- 1) Awareness. Awareness of life and death, of the might and majesty of Nature, and awareness of being the image of God, the One, who is – in Gandhi’s words – *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, truth, knowledge and bliss to him. Gandhi viewed most situations from a more integrated, holistic position.
- 2) Conceptualization. Gandhi was able to look at a problem from a conceptualizing perspective, *satyagraha*. In literal sense *satyagraha* denotes ‘holding firmly to the truth’. Gandhi defined it as ‘truth-force’ or ‘love-force’.

My chosen dilemma of servant-leadership is:

Leading versus serving. Throughout his long career as a political thinker and activist, Gandhi encountered the dilemma of either remaining faithful to his nonviolent principles and risking the failure of the Indian nationalist movement, or focalizing on the seizure of political power at the expense of his moral message.

Who was Mahatma Gandhi and how did he grow into a servant-leader?

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (his full name) was born in 1869 in Porbandar, a coastal town in Gujarat state.

His father served as a *diwan* (a high official) of Porbandar state and his devout mother came from the Vaishnava tradition, a monotheistic Hindu movement.

The Gandhi family was also influenced by the Jain tradition, one of the philosophical Hinduistic schools. Central notions of the Jain tradition are: compassion for all forms of life, vegetarianism and *ahimsa* (non-violence).

Gandhi made a statement in 1939 that reveals what spiritual advantages he began with despite growing up in a Western-dominated India. ‘I learnt to rely consciously on God before I was fifteen years old’.

Here he is not only referring to indigenous spiritualities in those days all over India, but also to the piety of his mother in particular, and, above all, to that special gift which his childhood nurse gave him – his mantram, the name of God, Rama. When Gandhi writes about meditation in one of his autobiographical writings, he tells us:

'When a child, my nurse taught me to repeat Ramanama whenever I felt afraid or miserable, and it has been second nature with me, with growing knowledge and advancing years. I may even say that the word is in my heart, if not actually on my lips, all the twenty-four hours. It has been my savior and I am ever stayed on it'.

In 1888, Gandhi travelled to London, where he earned a degree in law at the University College London in 1891. In London he met socialists and members of the Theosophical Society who influenced him. Gandhi became more and more interested in religious thoughts and in social justice being a part of religion.

In June 1891 he left London for India. His attempts to establish a law practice in Bombay failed. He should have been too shy to speak up in court.

Two years later he accepted a contract from an Indian firm in Natal, South Africa, then part of the British Empire.

In South Africa, Gandhi faced the discrimination directed at all coloured people and so he experienced discrimination himself. Once he was thrown off a train after refusing to move from the first-class and he suffered a lot of other hardships. These events shaped his social activism and awakened him to social injustice.

In the summer of 1906, Gandhi was doing ambulance service in South Africa in what was known as “the Zulu Rebellion”.

What he went through in this carnage, which was actually a massacre of Zulus by the well-armed whites, we can only imagine. But for some reason the crisis brought him to a personal decision that was to set his course irrevocable for the rest of his life.

Gandhi writes:

'During the difficult marches that had then to be performed, the idea flashed upon me that, if I wanted to devote myself to the service of the community in this manner, I must relinquish the desire for children and wealth and live the life of a vanaprastha - of one retired from household cares'.

By the way, when the 37-years old Gandhi wrote about this idea, four sons were born already. His marriage in 1883 was an arranged child marriage, according to the custom of India then.

After a new Act of the Transvaal government – compelling registration of the colony’s Indian population – Gandhi organized a mass protest meeting in the Empire Jewish Theater of Johannesburg on September 11, 1906. The Indian community responded to his leadership and vowed “with God as their witness” that they would never obey the discriminatory legislation about to be passed against them by the Transvaal parliament. At this moment *satyagraha* was born, devotion to the truth. (*satya* = truth). This means the search for and holding on to the truth. *Satyagraha* also implies an abstemious (sober) way of life, and striving for self-respect and non-violence.

The essence of *satyagraha* is that you seek to eliminate the conflict of interests without harming the antagonists themselves and seek to transform the dilemmas to a higher level.

But, what was the result of Gandhi's application of *satyagraha* in South-Africa? Thousands of Indians were jailed during a seven-year non-violent resistance. Finally, the public outcry over the bad treatment of peaceful Indian protesters, forced a South African General to negotiate a compromise with Gandhi. In 1914, Gandhi's non-violent actions were crowned with 'The Indians Relief Act', which awarded political rights to the Indian immigrants.

Gandhi's ethical thinking was not only influenced by the great Hindu literature like the *Bhagavad Gita* (his favourite source of sacred wisdom, which he repeatedly meditated upon), but also by a handful of other books. Only one of these books I will mention here: Leo Tolstoy's '*The Kingdom of God is within you*' (1893), because this book convinced Gandhi again of the great value of *ahimsa*, non-violence. Like Tolstoy, Gandhi was very impressed by Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*, which supported his Hindu and Jain notions of non-violence, vegetarianism, the avoidance of killing and universal love. Gandhi and the much older Russian Tolstoy agreed regarding opposition to state authority and colonialism, both hated violence and preached the lesson of truth, harmony, and brotherhood. They corresponded together until Tolstoy's death in 1910.

When Gandhi returned to India permanently in 1915, he was already well-known and recognized by most Indians as a *Mahatma*, a Great Soul. He joined the Indian National Congress and was introduced to Indian issues and politics. Gandhi took a liberal approach and he started the struggle for Indian Independence. In 1920 he started a spectacular movement against the British. Gandhi employed non-cooperation, non-violence and peaceful resistance as his 'weapons' in the struggle. In the beginning he had no success. On the contrary: many Indians were killed by British troops in Punjab, so many that it caused a deep trauma to the Indians and led to acts of violence.

In response of this awful happening, Gandhi criticised both the actions of the British Raj and the violence of Indians in an emotional speech, advocating his principle that all violence was evil and could not be justified.

In December 1921, Gandhi became leader of the Indian National Congress and reorganised this with the goal of self-rule. Furthermore he expanded his non-violence platform to include the boycott of foreign-made goods, especially British goods. For instance, he advised to wear the typical Indian home-spun clothes instead of British-made textiles. Gandhi even invented a small portable spinning wheel!

And so Gandhi went on with his non-violent actions. A famous action is the Salt March to Dandi from 12 March to 6 April 1930, a march of 320 km against the tax on salt. By means of the salt production, Gandhi wanted to break through the British monopoly. This campaign was one of the most successful at upsetting British hold on India; Britain responded by imprisoning 60000 people.

The British government decided to negotiate with Gandhi. In March 1931 a pact was signed and the British agreed to free all political prisoners in return for the suspension of the civil disobedience movement. Also as a result of the pact, Gandhi was invited to attend the Round Table Conference in London. This conference was a disappointment, because it focused not that much on a transfer of power.

Many times Gandhi was arrested and imprisoned. Once, on the night of April 28, 1933, Gandhi was awakened in a prison by a voice. He was urged to undertake a twenty-one day fast for self-purification, in order to advance the cause of the underclass of Hindu society, the so-called 'untouchables' – called 'Harijans' (Children of God) by Mahatma Gandhi. On May 8, Gandhi was released from prison and started his fast to help the Harijan movement.

He wrote about this voice:

What was it? What did I hear? Was there any person I saw? If not, how was the voice conveyed to me? These are pertinent questions. I saw no form. I have never tried for it, for I have always believed God to be without form. But what I did hear was like a voice from afar and yet quite near.....

Gandhi was convinced that he had heard the voice of God. Of course he had no evidence to convince the sceptic who said that it was all self-delusion or hallucination. But for the Mahatma there was nothing in the whole world that could put him off the belief that what he heard, was the true voice of God. For him, the voice was more real than his existence, he tells us in his writing *Pathway to God*. Gandhi experienced the blessed feeling of God's presence, his living faith solved the largest number of puzzles of life, alleviated his misery and sustained him in life.

Back to the history of India. In 1936, when Nehru became the chairman of the Congress, Gandhi wanted a total focus on the task of winning independent. When World War II broke out in 1939, the Congress party members and other political groups split up in pro-British and anti-British. The question was: either to support, or no to support Britain in its struggle against Nazi Germany. After long deliberations, Gandhi declared that India could not participate in a war ostensibly being fought for democratic freedom while that freedom was denied to India itself.

In 1942 Gandhi inspired the Congress to accept a resolution in which they demanded from the British to exit India immediately.

The Quit India-campaign became the most forceful movement in the history of India, with mass arrests and violence on a large scale. Thousands of freedom fighters were killed, injured or arrested. But Gandhi and his supporters made it clear they would not support the war unless India was granted immediate independence. Gandhi was arrested again and came out of detention after two years. During this detention his, also imprisoned, wife died.

At the end of the war, the British gave clear indications that power would be transferred to India. With the independence of India (August 15, 1947), the period of the Christian-Hindu encounter ended. Also cooperation between Hindus and Muslims was breaking down and was replaced by pro-Hindu tendencies. Gandhi attempted to bridge these differences and to conciliate Hindus and Muslims, but a Hindu nationalist shot him.

Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated on 30 January 1948. His birthday, 2 October, is commemorated in India as *Gandhi Jayanti*, a national holiday, and worldwide as the International Day of Non-Violence.

Of course Gandhi did much more during his life than I can tell in such a short time. He also strongly favoured the emancipation of women, he opposed to child marriage, untouchability, and the extreme oppression of Hindu widows. He looked for peace and justice, and above all: truth. That's why he said: '*as long as there are human beings, there will be different religions, but there is only one Truth, being considered or contemplated in different ways*'.

Gandhi realized as early as 1909, while steaming on board of a vessel to India and composing his tractate *Indian Home Rule*, that we are caught in a struggle, not between two peoples or two nations but between two ways of life. St. Augustine, in *City of God*, had called them two cities growing respectively out of two human loves – the love of self, or the love of the larger whole that Augustine called God.¹

Finally, an anecdote. One day a British cleric well-known for his imperialistic persuasion found himself face-to-face with Mahatma Gandhi. Wishing to paper over their differences, he is said to have remarked, "Well, we're both men of God, Mr. Gandhi, aren't we?" "You are a politician disguised as a man of God", the Mahatma replied. "I am a man of God disguised as a politician."²

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26 April 2012

¹ The Way to God, *Selected Writings from Mahatma Gandhi, Introduction by Michael N. Nagler*, p. xxv
² Ibid., p. xi

Statements of Gandhi; more about satyagraha (for debate)

I am striving for the Kingdom of Heaven, which is spiritual deliverance. For me the road to salvation lies through incessant toil in the service of my country and my humanity. I want to identify myself with everything that lives. In the language of the *Gita*, I want to live at peace with both friend and foe. My patriotism is for me a stage on my journey to the land of eternal freedom and peace.³

So let no one doubt that the salvation of all the exploited peoples of the earth, and therefore of the world, lies in the strictest reliance on the coin on whose one face is written 'truth', and the other 'non-violence', in large letters. Sixty years of experience has taught me no other method.⁴

Nations cohere because there is mutual regard among the individuals composing them. Some day we must extend the nation law to the universe, even as we have extended the family law to form nations – a larger family. God has ordained that India should be such a nation. Indeed, Hinduism teaches us to regard the whole humanity as one indivisible undivided family.⁵

Satyagraha: 'truth-force' or 'love-force'

This form of power is capable not just of neutralizing violence, but of **transforming** a situation, liberating reserves of energy in ways that acts of love or compassion often do. Gandhi assumed that the means of non-violence are superior, both in a moral and practical sense, to the means of violence because there is a force contained in emotions of love and compassion that can be stronger, more effective, than those in hatred or in the desire to inflict harm. 'Civil disobedience' and 'non-cooperation' are components of satyagraha. (Servant-leadership = transformational leadership).

³ Ibid, p. 38, 39

⁴ Ibid, p.32

⁵ Ibid, p.19