

UNDERSTANDING NONVIOLENCE

FROM TACTICAL NONVIOLENCE TO SATYAGRAHA

By Mark Shepard

What exactly do we mean when we say we're committed to nonviolence? Unfortunately, different people mean different things and are often not even aware of the differences.

The purposes of this piece are to give an idea of the range of meanings possible, to improve our ability to identify the types of commitment we encounter, and to stimulate our thinking on what we mean by nonviolence.

The characteristics of a nonviolent commitment can be classified in two general areas: the definition of nonviolence itself, and the type of commitment given.

Definition of Nonviolence

1. Scope of the definition. Does the prohibited violence include physical violence only? Or does it also include psychological violence (such as name-calling or isolation)?
2. Attitude toward the opponent. Is there an attitude of antagonism, in which the opponent is seen as an enemy? Or is there active caring for the opponent, with their welfare considered?
3. Intent of action. Is it to force the opponent to make changes against their will (coercion)? Or to change the opponent's mind and win them over to the other side (conversion)? Or something in between those two?

Nature of the Commitment

1. Extent of the commitment. Does it apply only to certain situations and occasions? Or is nonviolence seen as preferable to violence generally? Or is violence unconditionally renounced in all circumstances?
2. Motivation. Is the commitment to nonviolence based on expediency—superior force of the opponent, lack of weapons, and so on? Or on practical/humanitarian grounds—saying that relative human costs and results of nonviolent action make it a basically superior method? Or is the commitment based on a moral/ethical/religious principle?

Types of Nonviolent Commitment

Using the parameters above, we can identify two fundamental types of nonviolent commitment, which can be seen as the ends of a spectrum.

At one end is what has been called tactical nonviolence. People committed in this way generally prohibit only physical violence, may hold antagonism toward the opponent, and seek to win their goals by coercion. Their commitment is generally limited to individual actions or campaigns and stems from expediency. A good example is a labor strike.

At the other end is Satyagraha (SOT-yah-GRAH-hah), or Gandhian nonviolence. This is characterized by prohibition of both physical and psychological violence, active caring toward the opponent, and the intention to convert. Commitment to nonviolence is unconditional and is based both on principle and on practical/humanitarian considerations.

As a whole, the nonviolence movement in the United States has stood somewhere in between these poles, being a hodge-podge of individuals with varying beliefs, often not fully conscious. This has often led to confusion and dissension when devising and carrying out strategy and tactics. By knowing where everyone stands, such differences can be dealt with and possibly resolved.

What About You?

What does nonviolence mean to you? What is your commitment like?

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