

AS OLD AND YOUNG AS MOUNTAINS



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„Making Peace Without Weapons“ – since 1978 this motto has formed peaceful protests. It has been seen on thousands of billboards and its statement is the topic of many speeches. The motto was developed during protests against military actions, yet there is an implicit assumption that peace is more than “no weapons”. It is a sense that comes along with the insistence on truth and non-violence and, according to Mohandas K. Gandhi, the latter are as old as mountains.

The main characteristics of the peaceful protest are influenced by history and by personal experience in the context of non-violent resistance. Be it the campaign of the Quaker to fight for religious liberty (1656-1682), the Salt Satyagraha led by Gandhi (1930), the protest of women in the “Rose Street” of Berlin (1943) or the interfaith coalition against the Vietnam War founded by the Berrigan brothers – they all are examples of non-violent actions against inequity, depression and life-threatening measures (Thorbecke 2011:

In the following paragraphs, some thoughts of different persons will be used to demonstrate the complexity of an idea that has determined the peaceful protest up until now.

Non-violence as a life principle

The principle of non-violence is connected to a holistic view of life. Though it has several different dimensions, i.e. personal and political aspects that overlap (Gugel 1996: 15). It includes



© Hannah Bahr | Hard days of protest are more colorful with flowers.

21). They have made an impact and have set the pattern for subsequent campaigns. Their representatives spoke about non-violence as a basic principle for their actions. In spite of all discussions about non-violence there are various basic assumptions regarding what lies behind it.

an ecological alternative way of life, efforts to a non-violent education, moral courage, working on long-term problem solutions and the vision of a society without social classes and government authority (ibid.: 17), to name but a few. It offers an alternative to existing structures and implies

Gandhi's belief that the change of ourselves results in the change of life and vice versa.

In order to describe the complexity of non-violence, Gandhi (1869-1948) formed the idea of Satyagraha¹. Current peace scholars continue to use this very concept to analyze the potential of non-violence as an all-encompassing approach to solving conflicts.

Emerging Satyagraha

It is difficult to translate Satyagraha into another language without paraphrasing. Gandhi created this word that corresponded to the power structure and disputation at that time (Arnold 2011). It describes a power that was shaped through truth and love. Satyagraha does not mean the avoidance and evasion of violence, but the development of a specific power. Satyagraha deepens "ahimsa" (Indian word for non-violence), the well-known Indian term based on an old religious, philosophical and ethical tradition (ibid.). Perhaps employing the word "empowerment" is better than spreading the term "non-violence". Negative terms do not convey the proper message of Satyagraha. "A negative word does not create an action-guided vision" (ibid.).

Living out Satyagraha means recovering that power in oneself. Every person has the need for power, equity and truth which connect all people. For this reason Gandhi believed in Satyagraha throughout his struggle. It is important to love oneself and to get rid of self-doubt (Tempel 2009: 155). Self-doubt is in contradiction to Satyagraha which is an affirmative power. Similarly Nelson Mandela quoted during his inaugural speech in 1994: "And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our

own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." (words by Marianne Williamson).

Working on self-doubt includes coping with one's own fears: Fear



© Hannah Bahr | A mass against violence.

of the enemy, fear of inequality, the fear of failing and suffering and so on. When considering these aspects, one immediately also touches on the subject of patience, since working on oneself and therefore bringing about changes (inner changes as well as changes in the world) are processes that take time. While implementing change, it is important to keep the rhythm of our human existence in mind (Goss-Mayr 2011: 47). If we ignore that rhythm we automatically take up arms. Besides, "[f]orced changes do not last" (ibid.) and change takes its time.

Patience does not mean passiveness, as it is commonly misinterpreted. In this regard Satyagraha means being insistent. Amongst others, this insistence comes from Hindu traditions. „[...] It will serve no purpose if you go for something two days long and after it alight on a waste heap. [...]” (words by Sri Aurobindo) – it is all the more important that Satyagraha is understood as a principle of life instead of being seen as a method or

policy, that is used in specific moments only.

For this reason it is necessary that endurance is fostered (Goss-Mayr 2011: 47). There are different ways doing

so. Some meditate or pray (ibid.). Some search for human sources to rekindle their inner fire. That means, for example, inviting people during resistance that have been part of the non-violent resistance for years and that have the ability to share their power and spirituality (ibid.). Exchanges subsequently may give impulses and open one's mind.

Hildegard Goss-Mayr (2011: 46) noticed during her stay in the Philippines that the protesters were tired and looking for a space to breathe. The latter was required for their power of endurance. They therefore met up to cultivate friendship; to be with the family and children; to enjoy pursuing the right path to equity together (ibid.). Taking a deep breath and celebrating life is important to respond actively in a targeted manner. It contributes to getting rid of feelings of loneliness and helplessness and it furthermore helps to focus on the shared vision and long-term objectives. People's eyes shine in anticipation of happiness.

1) Satyagraha: Sanskrit Satjāgrah, satjā (truth) and agraha (insistence).

And happiness that accrues from the feeling of dynamism is proven to be contagious (Tempel 2009: 167).



© Hannah Bahr | Creative forms of protest.

Applying Satyagraha: Serving the enemy

If dynamism is known to be contagious and if it is a dimension of Satyagraha, does it mean that Satyagraha can also be passed on to the "enemy"? The crucial point of non-violence is indeed the love for enemies (Gugel 1996: 14).

"One shall serve the enemy, one shall pay homage to the enemy and rescue him by fighting against him. And one shall fight out all issues from start to finish. Though the end is not composed of victory and booties, but of reconciliation and peace." (del Vasto 1977: 59). Non-violence focuses the conservation of life, "the respect for every person" (Goss-Mayr 2011: 39) and is targeted on offering a humane life for all beings. It includes the basic acceptance of the human rights of the enemy by not violating the his dignity. Ending the enemies' lives would be in contradiction to this attitude. Hildegard Goss-Mayr (2011: 39) talks about a dual liberation: Liberating the victims and liberating the perpetrators. This works because of the belief that everybody has a conscience that is can be appealed to and that can be influenced (ibid.).

Non-violent communication, founded by Marshall Rosenberg, has assumed that it can be possible to forgive enemies if people among other things free themselves from grudge and old behavioral patterns that are no longer suitable. Being on a

reconciliatory path is a process and a very complex psychological issue.

Abandoning passiveness and resignation

Satyagraha means passing through an active, alert inner process. Since it has been developed during active protests, it also means offering active resistance. The term "non-violent action" is quite common when it comes to conflicts and solving these in a non-violent matter. This active dimension demands – amongst patience – commitment and the willingness to get involved in a conflict.

According to Hildegard Goss-Mayr (1976: 70, 71) a non-violent action is characterized by: (1) being inventive, creative and constructive, (2) being democratic (choose methods and strategies of action together) and (3) aiming for overcoming inequity (includes the dual liberation, see above).

A non-violent action implies that people are prepared to accept voluntarily and consciously the consequences that arise from the actions (Goss-Mayr 2011: 39). An example by Gandhi can illustrate the dimension of the aforementioned requirements: If you fail to convince lawmakers through petitions etc., then you have to force them to repeal the law by violating the law and then accepting the punishment (Gugel 1996: 35). Violated laws, blockades, occupations and damage to objects are part of the means of non-violent action (ibid: 18). Thereby, the protesters shall balance out the consequences for other people with the aims of their action.

If there is violence against the participants of a non-violent action, "[...] we either resist passively or ease." (ibid.). This shows that the protesters are prepared to suffer. Putting up with this kind of harm caused Gandhi to become known all over the world and to bring science to analyze this type of reaction carefully.

It cannot be taken for granted that someone would take on this type of challenge (Goss-Mayr 2011: 45). Thus, it is very important to prepare mentally, to think the chosen action through and to take part in trainings. And to be aware of the following: giving into a situation is not synonymous with giving up.

Preparing non-violent actions

There are a lot of ways to prepare a peaceful protest. Taking, for example, non-violent

communication: It is well-known through the life of Marshall Rosenberg, that non-violent communication contributed to a constructive culture of non-violent conflict resolution. It assumes that the most satisfying reason for acting is the desire for enriching life (Rosenberg 2007: 1). It is connected to the tradition of Satyagraha as a positive and constructive power. Many aspects of non-violent communication are located within peaceful protests and the preparations of non-violent actions. It maintains the dual liberation and supports protesters when the inner process is carried out. It makes protesters aware of the beauty of life and lends the power to continue fighting for equity.

Challenges

If an idea is extraordinary there are many challenges to it. Therefore the idea of Satyagraha calls for ample questions, problems and disputes (Gugel 1996: 194). There are so many experiences with non-violent movements and actions, but there is always the question of assignability. Is non-violence dependent on the political, social and cultural context? Other core issues, that arise and are discussed in peace studies, are: What is equity? Is it possible to solve all conflicts non-violently? Is the idea of mankind – especially in relation to the “enemy” – realistic? Who defines

violence? Is violence against objects authorised? Is non-violence merely the hype of departed persons like Gandhi? Does Satyagraha work in a context of genocide? (Gugel 1996: 194-213). These questions cannot be answered in a simple fashion and shall provide an incentive for detailed debates.

Those debates show that Satyagraha is indeed as old as mountains – old and young one has to admit. A mountain changes its character constantly and becomes taller and smaller, bigger and thinner. Satyagraha, as a power within people, is as old as mankind and is renewed every time a thought or a baby are born. ■



© Hauke Diederich | Is it a form of nonviolent protest, even when objects get destroyed?

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