
Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian Philosopher's Story

Mahatma Gandhi Born Mahatma Gandhi Born into a merchant family in 1869, Mahatma Gandhi was under the influence of powerful people. Members of his family had served as prime ministers of an Indian state for several generations. His parents were strong in their religion, being devout and earnest Hindus. They were apart of a Hindu sect that worshipped Vishnu and promoted non-violence.

Apparently, he was most influenced by his mother, a gentle and intelligent person. According to Hindu custom, he married at an early age and grew to love his wife greatly. Together, they had four children and adopted a fourth. Later, in 1888, he travelled to England to become a barrister-at-law. There were several important influences that he encountered here: the Western material style of life, which he decided not to follow, and in the simple Russian way of living he found: the New Testament, and the Bhagavadgita, the bible of the Hare Krishna movement. It was here that he developed a sense of the presence of God in his life and the lives of men. Gandhi then returned to India and studied law in Bombay, but he quickly denounced it, feeling that it was immoral and could not satisfy one's conscience. Despite this, he used his schooling to help plead for Indian settlers in South Africa that were being oppressed by the white population. His personal experiences, including being ejected from a train in Maritzburg, of not being allowed the same rights as others lead him to begin a movement to help his people.

While in South Africa, Gandhi made himself poor so that he could identify with his the peasants. He then proceeded to start a colony that consisted of abused labourers. The colony became very large and many cities were crippled by the lack of labourers. The government reacted to this by jailing Gandhi several times along with many other of his followers. The war he fought was one without weapons, already Gandhi was on his way to starting his career of non-violent campaigns. The main idea behind Gandhi's teachings was non-violence. The words of the Sanskrit language: ahimsa and sayagraha clearly express Gandhi's beliefs. The former means non-killing, non-destructive and the latter means the force of universal truth. He believed that the killing of man or beast is an unforgivable sin.

Many who promoted these teachings of Gandhi simply believed that it was their only option for resisting imperialism rather than having a moral conviction towards his teachings. He taught that the weapon that could be used was the conscience of the aggressor. This ahimsa is, to some degree, in the tradition of Hinduism. Hinduism teaches to stay away from temptation through various exercises that test one's ability to perform a difficult task, this devitalizes a person and causes him to act on a non-violent level. In addition, he taught that one should act rather be held under subservience. Gandhi himself once stated, "Mere knowledge of right and wrong will not make one fit for salvation...the Gita says: 'No one has attained his goal without action...'" From this quotation, we learn that his teachings are influenced by the Bhagavadgita and that he believes that one must act to reach a goal. But, he believed that one should denounce the rewards and simply devote one's life to acting on the behalf of others and that life should be lived near the soil, away from the influence of machines. Also, Gandhi strongly believed in upholding the caste system, believing that a person of one caste should stay a part of that caste. He also upheld the old Hindu tradition of segregation of castes, indicating that, "Interdining and intermarriage have never been a bar to disunion, quarrels or worse." According

to Hinduism, the caste system lies in respect for one another's individuality. Gandhi is well known for his efforts in fighting imperialism in India and South Africa. His methods were, unique in that they did not involve the use of weapons.

During the South African War of 1899-1902 and during the Zulu rebellion in 1906, Gandhi organised an ambulance corps consisting of Indians to help the British fight. He believed that duty dictated that the Indian population had a responsibility to help the British when they were in a time of need. Perhaps he was trying to show them that the Indians put an effort into helping the British forces just like everyone else and deserved the same rights as everyone else. It is interesting to note that Gandhi did not promote fighting, but he helped those who were in need of assistance.

After the law was passed that all Indians were required to carry an identity card with them at all times, Gandhi organized a group that resisted the government. In 1914, Gandhi and his followers received their first victory, the South African Government took away many of the laws that had no real purpose except to humiliate the Indian people. When Gandhi returned to India in 1914, the Indian population had heard of his accomplishments and he was given the name Mahatma, which means 'a man of great soul'. For the next little while, he examined the situation here and, while doing so, attained a few victories in his fight against oppression. Several times in 1917, he unhardened the spirits of peasants and motivated them to rebel without the use of violence. In 1919, Gandhi called upon all Indians to engage in non-violent disobedience against the British Government by withdrawing from Government jobs and from schools and colleges. The magnitude of this act showed when many cities were held at a standstill as the governmental system was unable to act. Such was the power of non-violent protest. When, in 1920, Gandhi became the leader of the Congress, more Indians gave up their governmental jobs to join the movement.

After many of his follower's were put into prison and cruelly dealt with, some people engaged in violence. Gandhi's distaste for this reaction showed, yet he blamed himself calling it a 'Himalayan miscalculation' to have failed to teach the people how to react non-violently before asking them to protest. As a result of his 'mistake', he called off the entire movement, thinking it had been a failure. On the contrary, the movement had been a great success, no longer did the Indians fear the British jails or the British guns. It was evident now, that the British Government in India was inevitably going to fall. After many failures to reach an agreement with the British Government and after a short 'Individual Civil Disobedience' movement where many were imprisoned, the British finally gave the power to the Indians in 1946.

But, the question remained as to whether or not the area should be separated into two on a communal basis. As a result, many riots broke out between the different interests of the people. Gandhi himself was opposed to separation and to the violence that had broken out. He went from village to village trying to get the people to understand the benefits of unity, but it wasn't working. He was forced to agree with his comrades in the Congress who promoted partition into two areas: India and Pakistan, which came about in 1947. In 1948, a Hindu fanatically shot Gandhi.

All over the globe, there was a certain sadness as many realized that the man whom they had looked up to and followed was now dead. As Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India put it, "The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere and I do not quite know what to tell you and how to say it. Our beloved leader, Bapu, as we call him the

father of our nation, is no more. Gandhi's influence certainly spreads the globe. He has been the role model for many famous, influential people. One of these persons is Martin Luther King, Jr (1929-1968) who was famous for leading a non-violent movement for racial equality in the U.S.A..

Another person is Joan Baez (1941-) who became famous as a folk-singer, a composer, and a guitarist. She lead many antiwar and civil rights movements in the U.S.. A third person could be Nehru, the first Indian Prime Minister of India. He was deeply saddened by Gandhi's death and could not have become Prime Minister without Gandhi's efforts. Indeed, Gandhi was a influential man who helped father the nation of India as we know it today. Without him, the Indians might still be held under British rule. Without him, many might not have been inspired to fight racism or imperialism non-violently.

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