

Mahatma Gandhi: Now and Then

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When Mahatma Gandhi was shot on the 30th January of 1948, his life was already a legend. Born as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on 2nd October 1869 in Porbandar, a coastal city in the Indian state of Gujarat, he has shown the world that social and political change can be reached not only through violence and terror but also by means of love and compassion. Gandhi strove to self-perfection first and foremost by trying to recognize his own errors and weaknesses.

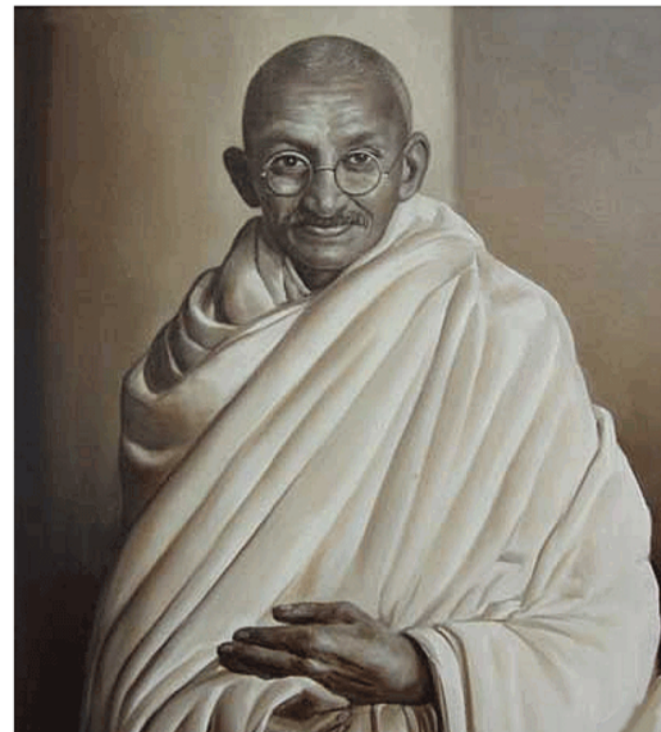
In this way he could approach living beings and the creations of nature with great respect and humility. He fought for his convictions and goals but always with peaceful and non-violent means. For Gandhi the search for God, non-violence and self-control belong inseparably together and form a holistic way of life, which he named with the concept of *Satyagraha*—keeping a firm hold on truth. In this concept religion and everyday life, thinking and action, goals and means are not separated. The ultimate goal of the human search for truth is to find God and thus one's own redemption (*moksha*), that is, the escape from existence (*samsara*).

Gandhi was awarded the honorary title of *Mahatma* ("great soul") in 1914 during a farewell ceremony, before returning to India after 23 years of residence in South Africa. He always rejected this title, for he did not wish to be seen as a "statesman in the robe of a saint", but rather as a seeker of truth who did not shy from "speaking the bitter truth whenever there is an



occasion for it". From then on, he became the decisive figure of the Indian independence movement, which only due to him turned into a true mass movement.

Gandhi was prepared to compromise while at the same time insistent with regard to civil and human rights. He led India from colonial dependence to political



independence. As spiritual leader of the India's freedom struggle, Gandhi held the world in suspense which is impressively confirmed by the newsreels of that time. After he had been murdered by a Hindu fundamentalist on 30th January 1948, he was stylized as a martyr and a mythic figure. His political action gave the oppressed colonial people of the "third world" a face, his philosophy and his actions still show the world an alternative to war and violence.

Gandhi's Spiritual Heritage more Alive than Ever

In India as elsewhere there are a growing number of civil rights movements and social action groups which support minority rights and the rights of the poor on a basis of Gandhi's ideas. While Gandhi's symbol for economic independence had been the simple spinning wheel, though, in present-day India it is cars, mobile phones and computers which symbolize freedom and progress. However, these luxury and consumer goods are obtainable only for a comparatively small, urban portion of the population. At the same time, the majority of the people, especially in the countryside, feel the ever increasing pressure of commercialization and growing competition and are driven further into poverty.

In the struggle against the neo-liberal trend of the economy the return to Gandhi's ideas may be helpful. The Indian civil rights activist Medha Patkar, who is a symbolic figure of resistance against the Narmada

dam construction project, expresses the feelings of many when she demands a change in thinking: "We need to reappraise our lifestyle according to the basic principles of simplicity, contentment, sustainability and justice. That is exactly what Mahatma Gandhi taught us when he led his great political struggle."

A look at the influence Gandhi has had on human rights movements worldwide shows that his ideas are highly relevant up to the present day and have been applied very successfully in the respective contexts. When one becomes aware of how many leading personalities of the 20th century call themselves students of Gandhi, it seems clear that his humanistic concept of non-violence and xenophilic philosophy—not the opponent is being fought, but his convictions—has left its mark on humanity like hardly any other. Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, Michael Gorbachev, Lech Walesa, Aung San Suu Kyi and many others have studied Gandhi and drawn on his ideas in their efforts towards a better world. It is not only for this that his spiritual heritage is more alive today than ever.

The international art and media scene impressively confirm Gandhi's actuality. There are excellent exhibitions about Gandhi's life and work, an opera, a musical, several theatre plays, numerous movies and documentaries for cinema and television. Of course, new books, CDs and DVDs are launched constantly—by now, there are well over 10,000 books on Gandhi in all languages. The internet, which is becoming an ever more important medium, has contributed much to the continued popularity of Gandhi.

For Gandhi the political freedom of India was a result of the personal freedom (*swaraj*) of the individual,



which is embedded in the continual striving towards truth. It is not new models of thought that the world needs to become better, but the practise of brotherly love and the search for truth by every person everywhere. Everyone must begin seriously practicing with oneself, carrying out one's own experiment with the truth, here and today, everywhere and with no end:

"An individual can practice the way of life of the future—the nonviolent path—without having to wait for the others. And if an individual can do that, then cannot groups, whole nations, also do so? Humans often hesitate making a beginning because they fear that the goal cannot be completely attained. Exactly this attitude is our greatest obstacle on the path to progress, an obstacle which every person, as long as he or she only wants to, can clear out of the way."

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