

When Can Nonviolence Be Used?

Stephanie: When can nonviolence be used? What situations call for nonviolence?

Michael: Another easy question again on one level. Nonviolence can be used in any and all situations. Because nonviolence means cooperating with the uniting power. And that is something that we can do any time, even if I'm just sitting, minding my own business, I've got this mind, you know? And it has thoughts. And these things might be I don't like the looks of that person. That person is doing a dumb thing. And I can simply refuse to let my mind run on like that.

And just believe it or not, I'm actually being nonviolent to an extent. I'm purifying the atmosphere and purifying the little thought generator that's going on in my own mind. But when people talk about nonviolence events in a historical sense, they usually mean big movements. And the history, for example – and we are starting to study it now at long last.

Friends of ours, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stefan have studied several hundred what they call, "Transitions to democracy," uprisings which overthrew dictatorial regimes. And they discovered that about 66% of the nonviolent overthrows were successful whereas only about 23% of the armed revolutions, the violent overthrows were successful.

So, nonviolence can be used in those dramatic conflict situations and that's what most people mean by nonviolence – nonviolence proper. So, in-between the big dramatic confrontations and the moment to moment readjustment of our thinking process, we might consider something that Gandhi came to feel was even more important than noncooperating and resistance, and that is constructive program. Building the civilization that you want using your own resources. Before you boycott British, which is penalizing you economically, learn how to spin your own clothe. Then you can stand up and say to the British, "We don't need your clothe anymore."

Now, there's one really important misconception about when nonviolence can be used that we should clear up here. People tend to think that nonviolence is very weak. They tend to think that it's an absence of something – terribly wrong. Those are really serious misconceptions. Nonviolence, when it's carried out properly is so powerful that Gandhi said, "It is the greatest force that humanity has been endowed with."

So, people used to say – and I have to say, I'm hearing this less and less of late and that's reassuring. But people used to say, "Nonviolence worked against the British because they were so polite and kind, but it never would have worked against Hitler." Well, the fact is that nonviolence worked against Hitler when it was tried. And the classic example that we know of was a prison demonstration on Rosenstrasse in 1943 in Berlin where Jewish men who had non-Jewish wives were rounded up and they were being processed to be shipped off to concentration camps.

Believe it or not, the wives collected outside that prison, their former Jewish community center, and demanded their men back. And guess what? The gestapo relented and gave back those men. We later discovered that all over Europe in various capitals the Nazi regimes were watching what went on in Berlin. And when they discovered that it was impossible to arrest these – what the Germans called, “Mishlinge,” or kind of half-breeds – they didn’t proceed to try to arrest them. In Paris, in Amsterdam, and Lisbon, and all these places.

So, tens of thousands of people were saved from the Nazis by a spontaneous demonstration by people who had no idea what they were doing. So, that’s the weakest form of nonviolence. It prevailed against the strongest form of violence.

And studies have shown that if you do it correctly and if you are willing to pay the price – let’s not shirk that responsibility. Obviously, if your opponent is ruthless, you may have to suffer more to bring him around or neutralize his effectiveness. But we people who promote and study what we call, “Principled nonviolence,” simply do not believe that there’s any situation in which it cannot be used.

I’ll mention one other case, though it’s sometimes confusing. Let’s say that somebody burst into a room where I’m giving a talk and they take out a weapon. They’re about to spray bullets all over the place – shoot the person because I’d be saving him and the prospective victims. But if I can do this, if I can use this lethal force without hatred and without fear, and if I can say at the end, “How have we come to this pass? I am going to tithe part of my energy to make sure that society is healed and we don’t create people like this again.”

And you might almost say that that is a nonviolent act because the technical literal definition of the word “Ahimsa” really means the force released when all desire or intention to injure is overcome. So, without that intention to injure it would not be a violent act. Though it’s noteworthy that Gandhi who was extremely active 15 hours a day, 7 days a week for 50 years, he never encountered a situation like that. And we’re not likely to encounter it either. We just mention it sometimes by way of clarifying the theory.

So, the long and the short of it is if you really understand the full width and depth of nonviolence, remembering that Gandhi said, “It is not the inanity it’s been taken for down the ages.” If you understand that it’s not negative, but a positive force resonating with the underlying unity of life, you’ll quickly see that there’s almost no situation where you cannot apply it.