

# “Carve a Tunnel of Hope”:

## Exploring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Nonviolent Philosophy

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**D**uring the Montgomery Bus Boycott, one of the volunteer drivers asked an old woman walking along the sidewalk if she wanted a ride to her house. The old woman responded that she was “not walking for [herself... but] for [her] children and grandchildren.”<sup>1</sup> This vignette shows the power of nonviolent resistance during the Civil Rights era, and how laws can be protested by engaging in acts of civil disobedience. Through Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches and his leadership during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he explains that the non-violent movement shows its strength for both individuals as well as for the entire group’s efforts. In his speeches “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom” and “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” King writes that the individual can gain a better understanding of one’s self through incorporating the idea of satyagraha<sup>2</sup> into one’s support of integration efforts on a national scale and in local communities.<sup>3</sup> Dr. King emphasizes the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott as a way in which groups of people engage in direct actions to combat institutions perpetuating injustice and immorality across the country. For both the individual and the group, Dr. King remarks that there is a virtuous and practical urgency to carry out nonviolent efforts for the benefits of future generations. Dr. King’s detractors—including Malcolm X—claim that nonviolence is a timid strategy, and are convinced that violence is the right way to retaliate against institutional racism. However, this does not deter Dr. King and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement from organizing marches and boycotts—showing the power of nonviolence methods to enact change within American society.

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1 Clayborne Carson, ed. “Chapter 8: Violence of Desperate Men,” in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998), 65–66.

2 When satyagraha is broken up into two words, “*satya* is truth which equals love and *graha* is force.” When they are put together, “*satyagraha* means truth-force or love-force.”

3 Martin Luther King Jr. “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” in *Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s*, edited by David Howard-Pitney, (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), 43.

Before understanding how Dr. King communicated his nonviolent philosophy to other people, one must first understand how his philosophy on nonviolence evolved from burgeoning intellectual ideas to concrete actions. Dr. King's nonviolent philosophy became complete when he started incorporating Mahatma Gandhi's method of nonviolence, including the idea of satyagraha, into his own philosophy. In a 1928 speech, Gandhi explained the idea of satyagraha as a way of "fostering the idea of [mental] strength...every day."<sup>4</sup> Thus, through Gandhi's method of nonviolence, Dr. King found a foundation of inner strength that complemented the Christian ideas of love and community. Though Dr. King had a steady faith in God, he gained a new sense of stability through Gandhi's idea of satyagraha—that would help provide him with another source of energy to persevere through tough moments during the boycott. The idea that one can cultivate the strength found in satyagraha combined with "the Christian doctrine of love...became the guiding light for the movement."<sup>5</sup> However, it was not until the Montgomery Bus Boycott began until Dr. King realized that "through the actual experience of...protest, non-violence became...a commitment to a way of life."<sup>6</sup>

Through both the "Christian doctrine of love" and Gandhi's method of nonviolence, Dr. King's ideas show how patient individuals, like Jo Ann Robinson, find a renewed sense of self and self-respect while engaging in nonviolent actions. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, some people expressed their doubts about the nonviolence method, claiming that the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) "needed a more militant approach" to their boycott because the group's nonviolent actions had been "weak and compromising."<sup>7</sup> Dr. King believes that these people became impatient with the results of the nonviolent method, and claimed that it was just "talk of fearful men...whose bold talk produces no action."<sup>8</sup> When explaining his ideas on nonviolence, Dr. King notes that once an individual person commits wholly to the method's foundational beliefs, that individual then "calls up strength and courage they did not know they had" inside them.<sup>9</sup> Engaging in nonviolent actions can help individuals

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4 Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, ed. "Chapter 44: Gandhi explains 'satyagraha,'" in *A Documentary History of Indian South Africans*, e-book, *South African History Online*. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/44-gandhi-explains-satyagraha>.

5 King, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," 43.

6 Ibid.

7 Carson, "Violence of Desperate Men," 67.

8 Martin Luther King Jr. "Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom," in *Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s*, edited by David Howard-Pitney (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 91-92.

9 King, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," 44.

find a greater sense of self and acquire “new self-respect.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, practicing satyagraha confirms an entrenched belief in an individual’s nonviolent actions. Jo Ann Robinson is a prime example of an individual who showed these characteristics during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Her devotion to her roles as both a planner of the boycott and a driver during the boycott shows how an individual can engage in courageous and righteous behavior to improve a community.<sup>11</sup> The idea that nonviolence can be branded weak or ineffective is a misconception that Dr. King says can be corrected through improving one’s personal relationships with one’s self. In “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King talks about this idea in relation to self-purification.<sup>12</sup> In order for these messages to be effective during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Dr. King believes in the individual’s ability to use nonviolence as a technique to combat social injustices in the community, and ultimately, “to adopt nonviolence later as a way of life.”<sup>13</sup>

Overall, the Montgomery Bus Boycott showed how non-violent methods work with a whole system of support working to combat the institutions perpetuating oppressive ideas and laws in America’s communities. In his autobiography edited by Clayborne Carson, Dr. King details the massive group effort from members of the MIA that helped their movement become a success. Dr. King notes that events like the Montgomery Bus Boycott are paramount to getting rid of laws that support inequality, writing that “there is nothing quite so effective as a refusal to cooperate economically with the...institutions which perpetuate evil in our communities.”<sup>14</sup> Dr. King understands that making the Montgomery Bus Boycott a success requires a herculean effort by a coalition of different groups, including “the forces of the churches, labor and the academic communities.”<sup>15</sup> At its core, participating in this boycott provides the group with a strong sense of solidarity throughout their year-long protest. This coalition helped with the logistics of the movement—from the MIA’s planning sessions to the organization of dozens upon dozens of drivers helping African-Americans get all across Montgomery for work or going home.<sup>16</sup> All the planning, organizing, and boycotting are direct actions that transform the word boycott from an idea to a movement. From there, the participants in these nonviolent actions “see the misery of...people so clearly that [they] volunteer[ed] to suffer in their behalf and put an

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10 Ibid.

11 Carson, “Violence of Desperate Men,” 66.

12 Martin Luther King Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s*, edited by David Howard-Pitney (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), 76.

13 Carson, “Violence of Desperate Men,” 68.

14 King, “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” 95.

15 Ibid.

16 Carson, “Violence of Desperate Men,” 65-66.

end to their plight.”<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, these participants’ efforts helped reach towards Dr. King’s goal of creating “a beloved community” where love and kindness conquers injustice in the South.

When reflecting on his nonviolent philosophy, Dr. King notes that in order for these efforts to continue working across America, “a qualitative change in our souls [has to occur] as well as a quantitative change in our lives.”<sup>18</sup> The core of the nonviolence movement has as much to do with growing one’s inner strength, as it has to do with helping out hundreds of individuals to carry out these actions. Dr. King melds together the Christian faith in God and love, with Mahatma Gandhi’s idea of satyagraha and “truth-force.”<sup>19</sup> Critics of the nonviolence movement who believed that using weapons would be a quicker response than a boycott or a march did not understand the power that comes from a group of people expressing righteousness and compassion during a time of uncertainty. The people who participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott expressed a desire to rid their communities of oppression and give future generations the opportunity to live in a beloved community.

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17 King, “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” 93.

18 Ibid., 94.

19 King, “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” 43.