

## **Unit K41: Satyagraha - the non-violent politics of Gandhi**

### **1. summary**

Gandhi opposes the usual politics of power interests with a politics of conscience, satyagraha. It is composed of truth (satya), non-violence (ahimsa) and self-suffering (tapas).

### **2. Satyagraha**

Satyagraha is a compound word and includes various components.

#### **2.1 The Politics of Interests**

Political theories consist of at least three parts. They are based, first, on a particular conception of man, on which, second, the corresponding conception of the state is based. From the respective image of man and the understanding of the state results, thirdly, the idea of how conflicts are to be dealt with and with which methods conflicts can be solved that arise between people and states.

However, politics is often understood as purely a matter of representing and enforcing the interests of individual groups or persons. This gives rise to conflicts that have been and continue to be fought out with violence. For this reason, Thomas Hobbes, for example, demanded that the monopoly on the use of force be delegated to the state for the purpose of securing order and peace, even if this meant restricting the rights of individuals. Thus, the state should, as it were, force people to make peace (cf. also ► Unit D 12: "State Concepts in the Early Modern Period and in the Enlightenment").

Thus, in the sense of Hobbes, the self-interest of the human community became the basis of state and society in general. A social contract was intended to ensure that the common good took precedence over the particular interests of individual groups or selfish, possessive

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individuals. This was to prevent people from exterminating each other. One of the fathers of modern state theory, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), called the original normal state of man before the conclusion of the social contract "war of all against all" and derived from it the meaning and purpose of politics. The state should regulate this war: It was to create laws that could provide for the balance of power between competing parties and interest groups and thus protect the fundamental rights of all to life and property. Hobbes (1966:131) wrote in this regard:

"Men, who by nature love liberty and dominion over others, introduced the self-restraint under which, as we know, they live in states, ultimately for the sole purpose and intention of thereby providing for their self-preservation and living a contented life-that is, of escaping the miserable state of war which ... from the natural passions of men, namely, when there is no visible force to keep them in check and to bind them by fear of punishment to the fulfillment of their contracts...."

Consistent to the last, Hobbes declared that the essence of the state is power.

Locke and Montesquieu corrected Hobbes' inclination toward (monistic) monarchy and introduced a division of power within the government. Rousseau and Hegel elevated the "rational self-interests" of individuals to a common will and world spirit. By and large, however, we still cling to Hobbes's view of politics and the foundations of human community today. That is why it has become the key to understanding the typical problems of modern political thought.

Like all regulatory mechanisms, modern states can fail in their purpose if they either exercise too much control or too little. When state regulations become too tight, the freedom of citizens is threatened, leading to tyranny and oppression. Conversely, when the state intervenes too little, a laissez-faire situation or even anarchy can result. Depending on where someone stands on the scale between tyranny and anarchy, he or she will hold a right-wing, left-wing, conservative, liberal, socialist, or even fascist position. One of the main

problems of modern political theories, therefore, is finding the happy medium between too much state control and too little. If the balance of power is lost, political or economic conflicts tend to work out in favor of the powerful and the rich, which can destabilize society.

When political regulatory mechanisms work properly, conflicts are resolved through compromise; when de-escalation efforts and arbitration mechanisms do not work, conflicts inevitably lead to war. In the politics of interests, there are basically three ways to resolve conflicts: Compromise, understood as what is feasible under given power relations, true consensus in the interest of the common good, or war.

## **2.2 The politics of conscience**

While the two world wars were shaking the belief in the superiority of European culture and bringing the world domination of the Occident to its end, an unknown Indian in South Africa developed the only alternative to the politics of power and violence that world history has ever seen. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi combined the spiritual power of Hinduism with Christian charity and the ideals of the democratic constitutional state to create a new way of reconciling political practice with religious claims. His life showed the skeptical world an example of this new politics, and his thought explained how the rift between absolute truth claims on the one hand and democratic consensus-building on the other could be overcome.

Because of his cultural background, Gandhi did not take for granted that man is selfish. For Gandhi, man is not primarily an animal, but a spiritual being. Therefore, his first motivation is not the search for material security, but the search for meaning and truth. Man is not determined in his being by animal drives such as life preservation and sexual gratification, but by his conscience or the need to stand in the truth. And because the truth revealed in the conscience is universal and desirable for all people, the pursuit of truth cannot exclude other people, as the pursuit of material things often results in. Selfishness is replaced by

selflessness. The **politics of conscience** takes the place of the politics of interests.

Such an amalgamation of religion and politics, however, seems to violate a principle of bourgeois society, namely "tolerance". We in the West learned in the 17th century that endless civil wars can only be avoided if all religious claims are eliminated from politics and relegated to the private sphere. The separation of church and state, as elaborated by John Locke in his seminal **Letter on Toleration** (1689), means that the absolute truth claims of conscience should no longer have anything to do with politics. Politics is the realm of **relative truth**. Every citizen may participate in the formation of public opinion, but only if at the same time he is prepared to compromise and to recognize majority decisions. The absolute truth of conscience, however, cannot be compromised, nor can it be voted on. What is right is not always what suits the interests of the most or the most powerful. Furthermore, claims of conscience pose a great danger to the state. For a religiously motivated person is often willing to take suffering upon himself, to sacrifice his property and even his life, in order to bear witness to the truth of his conscience. But those who are willing to die for their conscience elude those regulatory mechanisms that keep citizens in check through fear of punishment.

We have solved the problem of the "anarchy of conscience" in secular countries by a double morality. One is free to cultivate one's conscience, but only in the private, internal sphere. In public life, other norms apply, namely those of expediency and realpolitik. Gandhi was fundamentally opposed to such a double standard. He believed that every action has not only economic and social but also spiritual consequences. He was therefore often accused of interfering in politics as a religious reformer or even as a "saint." To this he replied that today politics has become so determinant for all of life that religion can no longer be separated from politics. He considered the seclusion and alienation from the world of the "pious" man and the mystic to be unacceptable in our time. Precisely the claim of religious truth to open up a meaning of life means to commit oneself to the common good.

Gandhi tried to escape the problem of fanatical fundamentalism or anarchy of conscience

that could arise from religiously motivated social and political activism through a new method of resolving conflicts. However, it is a common misunderstanding to equate the techniques of passive resistance, such as mass rallies, boycotts, strikes, noncooperation, and civil disobedience with Gandhi's method without further ado. Although in concrete disputes such "extra-parliamentary" means are often used, this is only because the common good is often given too little consideration in the normal political decision-making process. Indeed, Gandhi was not concerned with the enforcement of a particular program, but with the fundamental question of the common good and community building in a polity undermined by so-called systemic constraints. "*Satyagraha*," as Gandhi called his nonviolent method of resolving conflicts, "is not mainly civil disobedience, but a silent, irresistible search for truth" (quoted from Bondurant 1967:V, translation by David Krieger). It is not, then, a supposedly nonviolent method of asserting one's own interests. It is a matter of representing the truth in such a way as to be communicative beyond its limits. *Satyagraha* literally means "adherence to truth" and is explained by Gandhi in terms of three concepts: *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *tapas* (self-suffering).

### 2.2.1 Satya - Truth

*Satya* means truth. In Sanskrit, *sat* also means being and God; from this, Gandhi concludes that truth is God. From this religious concept of truth, in which, according to Gandhi, atheists and skeptics can also participate because they must both affirm some truth, he derives the following principles of his politics. First, truth is imperishable and indestructible. Whatever happens, truth will prevail, and falsehood will always be temporary. Second, he who acts according to truth prevails, even if his efforts seem unsuccessful at first. Even if only one person follows the truth and acts in the truth, he will be able to disempower an entire government, because it is God who acts through him. Third, from the truth come only deeds that are politically effective, that is, capable of establishing human community. Gandhi says, "Truth unites man with man into community. Without truth there can be no social order" (quoted from Iyer 1973: 168, translation by David Krieger). In our latitudes, we have heard time and again since Machiavelli that it runs just the other way around: that the

"raison d'état" forbids truthfulness in politics. Gandhi rejects all this, not as a moralist, but as a politician.

### 2.2.2 Ahimsa - non-violence as purpose and means

One might object here that such an "ideal politics" can only be realized when this highly praised truth becomes directly apparent to all people. For we too, like Pilate in his day, ask, "What is truth?" At this point, Gandhi's second term, *ahimsa* or nonviolence, becomes important.

Before the Hunter Committee, which investigated the Amritsar bloodbath (1919), Gandhi gave the following testimony:

Question: However sincere in his search for truth a man may be, his understanding of truth may yet be different from the understanding of others. So who can determine the truth?

Gandhi: Everyone will determine it himself.

Question: Different people have different views of the truth. Wouldn't that lead to chaos?

Gandhi: I don't think so.

Question: Sincerely seeking truth is different in each individual case.

Gandhi: Therefore, non-violence was a necessary conclusion. Without it there would be confusion and worse (quoted from Gandhi 1961:29).

What distinguishes Gandhi from any fundamentalist fanaticism is his thoroughly realistic assessment of man's ability to discern absolute truth. "We will never all think alike; we will always see truth in fragments and from different points of view. Conscience is not the same for everyone" (quoted from Iyer 1973:246).

Nevertheless, the voice of conscience is not a mere opinion, but it pronounces an unconditional commitment with absolute authority. Therefore, nonviolence alone is the

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means and the way to stand uncompromisingly by the fundamental truth of our conscience as well as to be open to deepening and expanding that truth. For if we impose our conception of truth on others, we elevate a possible partial truth to absoluteness and prevent the exchange of different points of view, which alone could give us the full truth. By forbidding by force any correction of our own position, we remain with our imperfect truth. Gandhi explained this through the following narrative:

"It seems that the impossibility of grasping the full truth in this mortal body led an ancient sage to the realization of ahimsa (non-violence). The question that came to him was, 'Should I tolerate those who cause me difficulty, or should I destroy them?' The sage saw that the one who destroyed others never progressed, but always stopped where he was, while the one who was lenient with his opponents went forward and first dragged the others along with him" (quoted from Iyer 1973:231).

Although fundamentalist discourse makes a claim to absolute truth, this claim becomes credible only when it is represented nonviolently. But then the truth claim loses its fundamentalist character, which is essentially violent. Gandhi formulated this paradoxical conviction in the "Creed of Nonviolence," which he published in the "Harijan" in 1935:

- (a) Nonviolence involves as complete a self-purification as is humanly possible.
- b) The power of non-violence grows proportionally to the ability to exercise violence.
- c) Non-violence is superior to violence without exception, i.e. the power that a non-violent person has is always greater than when he uses violence.
- d) Non-violence knows no defeat. Violence, however, always ends in defeat (after Iyer 1973:193/194).

Much of this credo will be incomprehensible until the third term *tapas* or self-suffering is explained. For now, however, it is important to see why Gandhi wanted something like a creed of nonviolence in the first place. Gandhi was aware that most people, even many of his closest associates in the Congress Party, could not subscribe to this creed. Indeed, for

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India's realpolitikers, it was a matter of adopting Gandhi's highly successful methods out of prudent consideration, as long as they were expedient to them. Gandhi therefore felt compelled to distance himself from the Congress Party on several occasions. The misunderstanding was great. For the politicians had set themselves the goal of gaining India's independence - and used the best available means to achieve that goal. For them, violence or non-violence was merely a question of tactics, i.e. a means to an end. Gandhi, on the other hand, placed primary emphasis on the means and cared less about ends and ends. According to Gandhi, only just means could lead to a just end.

The credo of nonviolence was so important to Gandhi because he could not accept the traditional emphasis on ends in political theory and the related doctrine that ends justify means. First, he argued, it is not at all true that people make a strict distinction between ends and means in everyday life. No one knows so much or is so confident that he does not have to keep questioning the moral value of the means he uses. Second, we have only the means in our control; the end is not. Third, it is simply not the case that the end justifies the means, but rather it is the means that determine the value of the end. And finally, Gandhi said, our means must be good in themselves, since we are obliged to do the good anyway. For Gandhi, then, nonviolence is both a means and an end:

"Without *ahimsa* it is not possible to seek and find truth. Ahimsa and truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to keep them apart and separate them. Ahimsa is the means, truth the end. The means must always be within our reach, so ahimsa is our highest duty. If we strive for the means, we will certainly reach the end sooner or later. Once we have understood this, we can be sure of victory" (quoted from Bondurant 1967:24,).

But this does not solve the problem. For how can we become aware that our conception of truth is not perfect? After all, all the different ideologies and many religions claim exactly this about their beliefs. But if one is convinced that one's own truth is absolutely correct, the use of all possible means to enforce it can be legitimized. To avoid precisely this danger, the



Enlightenment sought to banish all religious truth claims from the public sphere. But we have seen that the problem cannot be solved in this way in our postmodern global situation. **The return to the religious, which is often criticized with the fighting word "fundamentalism," indicates that the suppression of religion from public life has failed.** In order to understand how the militancy of fundamentalist thought, which is also manifest among the Enlightenment thinkers, can be defused and incorporated into a communicative practice on a higher level, we need to explain Gandhi's third term tapas (self-suffering).

### 2.2.3 Tapas - The Happiness of Suffering

After 50 years of experience, Gandhi was convinced that the only thing that can break an ideological absolutization of the conception of truth is voluntary self-suffering and the love of one's enemies that goes with it. For in every conflict the expected resistance of the opponent becomes, first, a confirmation of the already made condemnation of his position and, second, a legitimization of his own use of force. But if the opponent does not respond with violence and hatred and nevertheless resists, then according to Gandhi no human being can remain untouched. The one who uses violence will have to ask himself in time where his "opponent" gets the moral strength to behave in such a way. Obviously, he also has a share in the truth. So the one who uses violence must question his ideology which justifies this violence.

Thus, non-violence becomes a **critique of ideology**. For when the aggressor sees that we take the suffering upon ourselves and that no suffering is inflicted upon himself, then fear and mistrust dissolve into genuine dialogue. In a non-violent confrontation, therefore, the others do not have to suffer for our mistakes, and these mistakes do not escalate into new points of contention and into new acts of violence. It is possible to stay on the point and reach a constructive solution. In contrast, violent upheavals lead to new violence. That is why Gandhi rejected theories of violent revolution.

Of course, this non-violent critique of ideology does not work if it is only directed outward

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and one's own ideological convictions are not also questioned. Gandhi built the inward ideology critique into the basic rules of all genuine nonviolent action. These rules include:

- 1) Reducing one's own demands to the minimum and reviewing this self-critically.
- 2) Continuous search for a solution to the conflict, which the opponent can also accept.
- 3) Such a solution must also fully satisfy the opponent. In addition, there is a strict discipline, which makes the observance of such rules possible (after Bondurant 1967:38ff).

Critics have labeled Gandhi a fanatical pacifist who had no idea of the real nature of social and political conflicts. Until today, we in the Christian West have not been able to do much with Jesus' words: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist him who does evil to you, but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also'" (Mt 5:38-40). This word, which for us is often just a non-committal statement of faith, became for the Indian Gandhi a kind of science of action. By applying the power of the spirit, he succeeded again and again in bringing political events to another level.

Thus, nonviolence becomes a tool of community building only when people replace the power of weapons with the power of the mind. This spiritual power, or "soul power," as Gandhi called it, is attained only through *tapas*. Gandhi saw conflict among people and between states as inevitable. Accordingly, history is also inevitably connected with suffering. This is because suffering is created by every conflict. The task of human beings is to take on this suffering voluntarily so that the process of community building becomes creative and free.

Most people, however, react with fear in a conflict situation out of ignorance of their true task and ability. They try to shift the suffering onto the other person. This "natural" reaction is, according to Gandhi, the origin and essence of violence. For violence is nothing other than the attempt to escape suffering in a conflict by shifting it onto the other. Non-

violence, on the other hand, consists in voluntarily taking this suffering upon oneself. And this suffering voluntarily taken upon oneself is what Gandhi understands by the term *tapas*.

### 2.3 Satyagraha

Satyagraha is a self-suffering (*tapas*), non-violent (*ahimsa*) adherence to the truth (*satya*). It was deliberately developed by Gandhi as an alternative to the politics of interest prevalent in the West, and was tested and tried for 50 years in many different situations. Gandhi offers it to us as a fixed result of "scientific" research and, moreover, as a method and instrument of communication and understanding in conflicts on the level of ultimate convictions.

Faced with such a claim, we are today like the scholars and church leaders of Galileo Galilei's time. With his telescope, Galileo could see things that no man had seen before him. He discovered new, unknown stars and planets and was able to scientifically prove theories that had previously been dismissed as wild speculation. When Galileo asked the scholars to look through his telescope to see for themselves that the heavens were indeed as he said, they refused to use his instrument because - and here there is a parallel with Gandhi's method of non-violence - they claimed that nothing new and useful could be discovered with such an instrument.

Satyagraha unites religion and politics. It is not only a means, but also an end, and it proves that a real search for the absolute truth does not take place outside of politics only in private spheres, but only in social commitment and in the tasks of community building.

Thus - always in the sense of Gandhi - the gap between religion and politics is overcome, which the Enlightenment had created in the hope of being able to establish a "rational" society through it. If today this hope has to be abandoned because of the ideologization of reason and the postmodern dispute of world views, it is not in order to surrender the public discourse of "agonistics" - that is, the struggle of all against all - to all-sided fundamentalist

apologetics. It may well be that we cannot help but stand up for truth as we (know) it. And yet, we are not condemned to polemics because we can defend our truth without violence. Satyagraha enables communicative action beyond the boundaries of respective ultimate convictions. Because it is based on a deeper solidarity with the other, which is not based on definitions of reality and group identities. This is also the difference between Gandhi's Satyagraha and the method of "passive resistance" as it is often understood in the West.

Many misunderstandings about Gandhi's conception of nonviolence can be traced to its confusion with the method of "passive resistance." Gandhi rejected the term passive resistance because he found it insufficient to describe his own methods. He pointed out no less than five differences between satyagraha and the method of passive resistance: First, passive resistance is a weapon of the weak, i.e., those who are unable to use weapons, while satyagraha is a weapon of the strong, i.e., those who would be able to use force but refuse to do so. Second, passive resistance, understood in this way, allows one to condemn the opponent, while satyagrahis (those who practice satyagraha) try to achieve solidarity with the opponent through self-suffering in order to truly help him. Third, self-suffering is incidental in passive resistance, while it is essential in satyagraha. Fourth, passive resistance - precisely because it is potentially violent - is not applicable everywhere, while satyagraha can be practiced even between group and family members. Finally, passive resistance is negative, because it only fights against something, and does not work out new, constructive solutions acceptable to the opponent. Satyagraha, on the other hand, is always willing - although it does not make false compromises, because truth cannot be compromised - to learn new things about truth through "reflective conversion" and thus to break through to a solution that moves both sides forward.

#### **2.4 Satyagraha and the Terror of the National Socialists**

It is interesting to note a statement by Gandhi in which he suggested that Jews in Nazi Germany resist the Nazis by the method of satyagraha. Judah L. Magnes (in Bartolf 1998:30/31) then wrote Gandhi the following letter:

"Dear Mr. Gandhi,

What you said the other day about the Jews is a statement that I have seen so far and I have to deal with it fundamentally. Your statement is a challenge especially to those of us who imagined ourselves to be your followers.

I am sure that you are correct in asserting that the Jews in Germany can perform satyagraha against 'the godless frenzy of their dehumanized oppressors'.

But how and when? You give no answer to this. You may say that you are not sufficiently familiar with German persecution to outline the practical method of Satyagraha for use by the German Jews. But one of the great things about you and your teaching has always been that you have strongly emphasized the prospect of practical success when Satyagraha is performed. But so far you have not given the German Jews any practical advice which only your unique experience could give, and I am not clear whether it is helpful merely to urge the Jews of Germany in general to perform satyagraha. I have heard that many Jews in Germany have asked themselves how and when satyagraha must be performed, without having found the answer. The conditions in Germany are radically different from those which prevailed in South Africa and in India. Those of us who are outside Germany must, I suppose, think very carefully about the advice we give to the unfortunates who are caught in the clutches of the Hitler beast.

If you take in your statement the sentences about what you would do if you were a German Jew, I think you would find that not only one German Jew, as you demand, had 'courage and vision,' but many of them, whose names are known, and more of them, who bore witness to their faith without their names becoming known.

'I would claim Germany as my home'. There has never been a community more passionately attached to its homeland than the German Jews were to Germany. The thousands of exiles who are to be found everywhere today are so thoroughly German in their attitudes, in their psychology, in their language, their customs, their prejudices, their appearance, that we wonder how many generations it may take before this is uprooted. The history of the Jews

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in Germany goes back at least to the time of the Romans, and although throughout their history there the Jews have been killed in massacres and driven from there on various occasions, one thing or another has always brought them back there.

'I would challenge him to shoot me or throw me in the dungeon.' Many Jews - hundreds, thousands have been shot. Hundreds, thousands have been thrown into the dungeon. What can Satyagraha offer them? I ask this humbly; for I am sure that you could give a constructive answer.

'I would not wait for my fellow believers to join my civil resistance, but trust that the rest will eventually follow my example.' But surely the question is, how can Jews in Germany offer civil resistance? The slightest sign of resistance means murder or concentration camps or elimination by other means. Usually they are made to disappear in the silence of the night. No one, except their frightened families, learns about it. It does not even ripple the surface in the lives of the Germans. The streets are the same, business goes on as usual, the occasional visitor sees nothing. Contrast this with a single hunger strike in an American or English prison, and the public uproar it causes. Contrast this with one of your fasting actions, or with your salt march to the sea, or with a visit to the Viceroy, when the whole world is allowed to cling to your words or witness your actions. Has this not been possible largely because, for all the excesses of its imperialism, England is, after all, a democracy with a parliament and a considerable amount of free debate? I wonder if even you would find your way to public opinion in totalitarian Germany, where life is blown out like a candle and no one sees or knows that the light is out.

'If a Jew or all Jews should accept this proposal made here, he or they can be no worse off than they are now.' Surely you do not mean that those Jews who are able to leave Germany would be as badly off as those who must remain? You call attention to the unimaginable cruelty which sanctions against all Jews a crime committed by 'an obviously insane but intrepid youth'. But the attempt on the part of even one Jew in Germany, let alone the community there, to offer civil resistance would be considered an infinitely greater crime, and it would probably be followed by a repetition of this unimaginable cruelty, or worse.

'And the suffering voluntarily taken upon themselves will give them inner strength and joy.' I marvel that no one has called your attention to the fact that those German Jews who are loyal to Judaism - and they are the majority - have in great measure the inner strength and joy that come from suffering for your conviction. It is those unfortunate 'non-Aryans' who have a trace of Jewish blood, but who were raised as German Christians, who must be most pitied. They have to endure suffering and do not know why. Many of them have been brought up in contempt of Jews and Judaism, and now this despised people, this scorned religion, in their eyes, is the reason for their suffering. What a tragedy for them."

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It must remain open to what extent a policy of satyagraha can be practiced even in a situation of extreme violence and the most brutal terror (cf. also ► Unit E16: "Conflict and Ethics"). Nevertheless, satyagraha is an approach that should not be completely forgotten in conflict and crisis intervention in violent situations - and especially in intercultural fields.

### **3. Control Questions**

1. Explain the classical politics of interests!
2. Explain Hobbes' understanding of the state!
3. What does satya mean?
4. Explain the term ahimsa!
5. Why is the Satyagraha in the sense of Gandhis not a non-violent strategy around own interests to carry through?
6. Which four points did Gandhi's "creed of non-violence" include?
7. What is meant by tapas?
8. Explain the three basic rules of real non-violent action according to Gandhi!
9. What criticism did Gandhi's opponents make of these basic rules?
10. Explain the following sentence: Satyagraha unites religion and politics.
11. Why did Gandhi reject the idea of "passive resistance"?
12. What are the implications of satyagraha for today?

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13. What questions and objections did Magnes raise to Gandhi's proposal to apply satyagraha in Nazi Germany?

### 4. Links

#### Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence Relocates to University of Rochester

<http://www.rochester.edu/news/show.php?id=2924>

#### Zitate von Mahatma Gandhi

<http://zitate.net/mahatma%20gandhi.html>

#### Mahatma Gandhi als Vorbild

<http://www.dadalos.org/deutsch/vorbilder/vorbilder/gandhi/gandhi.htm>

#### M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence

<http://www.gandhiinstitute.org/>

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