

An Unending Experiment
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People who work to transform society are persecuted by forces resistant to change, as exemplified by Gandhi's life, which he called 'an unending experiment.' But by withdrawing from this struggle, we allow the forces of good to be defeated by the forces of evil.

When asked, "Why did Mahatma Gandhi succeed?" Dr. N. Radhakrishnan, director of the memorial center Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, has a clear and quick reply: "Because he was afraid of nothing." His words echo my own conclusion. The name *Mahatma*, meaning Great Soul, was synonymous with great courage. Courage is contagious. Everyone who came into contact with Gandhi felt their spirits rise, their fear and sadness inexplicably dissipate.

Once in the state of Kerala, at India's southernmost tip, a young man stood before an angry mob. It was a group of Gandhi's detractors, and the young man unflinchingly shouted them down. That young man was Dr. Radhakrishnan's father, Neelakantha Pillai. This happened in 1924 or 1925, about 10 years after Gandhi had returned to India from South Africa.

Gandhi described his life as an unending experiment. He boldly tried to transform the Indian people, calling on them to purify their hearts. He traveled all around India to spread his message. In Kerala, Dr. Radhakrishnan's home state, Gandhi also led a campaign protesting the treatment of the untouchable class, a group of Indians considered outside of the caste system and subject to dehumanizing discrimination. They were not allowed to enter the temples, homes or shops of Hindu people, to touch the belongings of others, or even to use public roads or wells.

Gandhi rose up to protest this inhumane treatment. "I am not interested in freeing India merely from the English yoke," he said. "I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever." He would reform society from its foundations.

Changing human beings is the only way to accomplish this. Any change made without changing people's basic thinking and attitudes will not endure. The essence of Gandhism was a movement for inner transformation — a human revolution — at the grass-roots level.

It is never easy to overturn customs, practices and beliefs that have survived for thousands of years. Even some of Gandhi's comrades were taken aback by his unflinching courage. But Gandhi loved the people of the oppressed untouchable class. He called them the Harijan, or the children of god. It was his firm conviction that, irrespective of his or her social position, anyone who discriminated against the Harijan was guilty of great moral evil.

Gandhi once attended a meeting only to find the Harijan participants shunted aside in a corner of the hall. He immediately went to them and took a seat in their midst. He spoke to the crowd from there, transforming the outcast seats into the best seats in the house. It was his wish to do the same thing for society as a whole. He was a fearless revolutionary.

Dr. Radhakrishnan has said that Shakyamuni, widely known as Gautama Buddha in India, fiercely challenged the caste discrimination of his age. Instead of simply being called a Buddha, he could also be described as a reformer, a teacher and a revolutionary. In a sense, Dr. Radhakrishnan said, Gandhi's struggle was a continuation of Shakyamuni's. He declared that Gandhi was a true bodhisattva.

Both Shakyamuni and Gandhi wanted to transform society; they were not reclusive

sages who withdrew from the world. That is precisely why they were both persecuted by forces resistant to change.

Dr. Radhakrishnan's father, too, was a human rights activist. His native state of Kerala imprisoned him on several occasions. Altogether he spent some six years in prison. He was allowed to return to his home only after India gained independence in 1947. Dr. Radhakrishnan recalls of that time: "My mother did everything she could to support my father. She was raising young children, had no income and was always in danger of being arrested herself. She endured a great deal, yet she never gave up."

Only six months after independence was achieved, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated (Jan. 30, 1948). He was on his way to a regular prayer meeting. He was a little late in leaving for the gathering because he had guests. He was 78 and weakened by his age and his fasting, but he stepped briskly to the meeting, worried about the time, with two young women helping to support him as he walked. "If it is time to give medicine to a patient and one feels hesitant about it, the poor patient will die," Gandhi said. "So it is with prayers. It irks me if I am late for prayers even by a minute." Immediately after he said those words, three shots rang out. A fanatic Hindu had stalked and assassinated him.

For Gandhi, every minute counted. Up to the last moment of his life, the Mahatma was devoted to the service of the Indian people. His last step was a step into the midst of the people. His last words were inspired by his love and concern for the people.

At the time of Gandhi's death, Dr. Radhakrishnan was 4 years old. His parents and his mentor, Dr. Ramachandran, taught him Gandhi's spirit. After Gandhi's assassination, the nonviolent movement suddenly lost momentum. Many of the facilities founded in sympathy with Gandhian ideals were exploited by certain individuals for personal profit and fame.

But there were some who did not forget Gandhi's spirit. Dr. Radhakrishnan's parents founded a Gandhian Constructive Workers Home, sponsoring farming and craft activities. Despite their own financial difficulties, they also founded an adult education center, where people could better themselves.

They wanted to put into action their teacher's message: Serve the poor. They worked without rest. By insisting that their children pitch in and do their share of the work along with the other members of their community, Dr. Radhakrishnan's parents raised their seven children to know the honest sweat of physical labor.

When he was only 14, Dr. Radhakrishnan was arrested twice for his involvement in a student protest against the educational policies of the communist party-controlled state government. What he couldn't accept was that the communists had labeled Gandhi an enemy of the workers and an ally of the capitalists — the reason being, apparently, that Gandhi had been a personal friend of the famous Indian businessman and financier G.D. Birla. How could anyone dare call the Mahatma, who had devoted his entire life to the Indian people, an enemy of the workers?

Father and son alike were enraged. They would not compromise. The student protest movement continued until the state government was ousted in elections.

"How easy it is to give up and find reasons to withdraw from the eternal 'battle' that confronts man at every moment of life," Dr. Radhakrishnan wrote in *Daisaku Ikeda: In Pursuit of a New Humanity*. But, quoting a great Indian epic, he asked, "Are we going to allow the forces of good to be defeated by the forces of evil?"

After completing his postgraduate studies, Dr. Radhakrishnan displayed a variety of talents, becoming a youth leader, a writer of great promise, and winning a Best Actor of the Year Award at a state-sponsored Festival of Arts and Drama. A bright future lay ahead of him, whatever path he might decide to pursue. His brothers, in particular, hoped that he

might join the Indian Civil Service.

A turning point in his life came when he met the individual who would become his mentor. Dr. G. Ramachandran, who had been a close associate of Gandhi's, addressed the young Radhakrishnan at a meeting in New Delhi. The older man vividly remembered the youth's father boldly remonstrating with a crowd of Gandhi's detractors in Kerala many years earlier. He asked Radhakrishnan to be an instructor at an institution of higher learning he had founded in Tamilnadu. The young man accepted. He taught at the Gandhigram Rural University and served his mentor for more than 20 years.

Dr. Ramachandran was a strict teacher. "He could be very demanding," recalls Dr. Radhakrishnan. "He wouldn't permit a speck of dust in the house. And he scolded me if I was even a minute late for an appointment." It seems that the rigorous training and discipline of Gandhi, who valued punctuality so highly in his own affairs, lived on in Dr. Ramachandran.

When the Indian government tried to institute mandatory military training on university campuses in the 1960s, Dr. Ramachandran vigorously opposed it. "I will never permit my students to take up arms," he said. "I will oppose this, even if I have to fight alone to the bitter end."

His late mentor Gandhi had called out to young people to be champions of nonviolence. Dr. Ramachandran could never betray that ideal. He kept up his struggle until he was 90 years old. In his final words, he declared that though his body might die, his spirit would always be with his comrades. He would continue to fight alongside them and hoped that they, too, would persist in their cause, one in spirit with him.

My own mentor, Josei Toda, the Soka Gakkai's second president, was also extremely strict. "The relationship of mentor and disciple is only cemented when the disciple proves himself a good one," he said. "It all depends on the self-awareness of the disciple."

After his mentor's passing, Dr. Radhakrishnan traveled around the world as an emissary of Gandhi's teachings, calling on his father and his mentor to watch over him and his efforts. He was determined to create a great history by carrying on their work.

He worked with youth in both labor service and aid programs, living the life of a fighter for peace on the front lines as a member of the Shanti Sena (Peace Brigade). His life was threatened because of his efforts to continue Gandhi's struggle against discrimination.

In 1992, I visited the Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, a memorial centering on the old Birla House where Gandhi spent his last 144 days. Dr. Radhakrishnan, as the center's director, gave me a tour. At the very back of the ground floor, there was a simple room with a bed and several utensils of daily life. Here the Mahatma carried out his last fast (of six days) as a protest against bloody conflicts among fellow Indians.

Many paid lip service to the Mahatma's greatness, but far too few of the Indian people really understood the heart of his message. Gandhi frequently recited a verse by the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore:

*If they answer not to thy call walk alone,
If they are afraid and cower mutely facing the wall,
O thou of evil luck,
open thy mind and speak out alone.*

*If they turn away, and desert you when crossing the wilderness,
O thou of evil luck,
trample the thorns under thy tread,
and along the blood-lined track travel alone.*

Title: My Recollections: N. Radhagrishnan

Subject: World Tribune 01/30/98 n.3176 p.14 WT980130p14

Author: Daisaku Ikeda

Keywords: Activists Experiment People Radhagrishnan Recollections Tribune Unending World

From the room a small path was visible. Gandhi's last footsteps on this earth — those he took on his way to that fateful prayer meeting — have been preserved there. I walked the path with Dr. Radhakrishnan.

The sky over New Delhi was a dazzling blue. Great trees with lush green foliage cast deep shade. The short path seemed extraordinarily long. I felt as if the Mahatma walked it still, directly into the heart of the people and toward the boundless future.

Even now his bold steps move forward with courage and determination. The Mahatma, the Great Soul, lives. For here is his second-generation disciple, his youthful counterpart Dr. Radhakrishnan.

When I left the garden of the Gandhi memorial hall, my friends from Bharat (India) Soka Gakkai were waiting for me, with smiles bright as the beaming sun.

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