

LEARNING A NONVIOLENT LIFESTYLE

Arun Gandhi is the founder of the M. K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence and the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. Yoshi Nagaoka, a staff writer for the Seikyo Shimbun, the Soka Gakkai's daily newspaper in Japan, did this interview with him.

Yoshi Nagaoka: Almost a whole century has passed since your grandfather started the nonviolence movement. How do you view the world situation today, based on your activities for peace?

Arun Gandhi: I have many opportunities to visit not only the United States but other countries to meet many adults and children. Through those trips, I have found commonality among those countries about the spiritual aspects, which are a foundation for peace and humanity. The fact that we don't give children spiritual values, which is the foundation to build their future, is a commonality I often see.

By spiritual values, I mean understanding, love, education, values, morals and ethics. That is the same in developed and underdeveloped countries. When you see so much violence in young people, in countries like the States and a few other countries, it's because of the anguish and pain that they are unable to relate to others. They are unable to relate to the older generation. They don't know what's going on, and they show their anger with violence.

This was part of capitalism, because capitalism requires that you make money the best way you can by any means necessary, and profit becomes the most important thing in life. People don't matter anymore. You only have to respect people to get rid of them, and you have to make a maximum profit. That is the principal way rich capitalism works.

It generates a lot of self-centeredness and selfishness, because everyone is thinking only about themselves. This is the tragedy that I've seen in many countries. Materialism is their goal and life. Then there is no morality. The devilish power of desire is hard to stop.

We need to rediscover autonomy to understand other people's pain and to respect others. That's why the Gandhi Institute puts the main focal point on education.

Nagaoka: Why did you open your institute in Memphis, Tenn.?

Gandhi: I moved to the States in 1987 and started my study in Mississippi. Until then, I had spent my youth doing many activities with my father in South Africa and learned the reality of the prejudice there. After I married, I moved to India. For 30 years, I dedicated myself to social activities against poverty — centering in the Bombay area — and I learned the reality of prejudice in India.

These experiences directed my eyes to the States to study about the prejudice here. Actually, prejudice in the States has a different background and history compared to South Africa or India. However, I remained confident that the nonviolent philosophy of my grandfather could be a valid solution for this country. That is the reason I opened my institute in the States.

There are three reasons why I opened the institute in Memphis. First, a university in Memphis first offered a space for us. Second of all, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was

assassinated there, and it has a commemorative meaning and appeal about humanism to the world. And finally, this location makes travel in the States convenient.

When we opened this institute, we did not have enough money in our savings. So we had to sell memorial relics of my grandfather. This institute was established by three generations of my family.

Nagaoka: Can you share some memories of your father, a successor of Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa?

Gandhi: Mahatma had four sons, and my father was the second. When my grandfather returned to India, all his work in South Africa was taken care of by my father, who was only 23 years old. Now I understand my father's struggle.

He lived with the pledge that he made to his father. That caused a deep inner struggle to fight the weaknesses of his mind. It would have been much easier to live if he had followed the government, white people or authority, but he didn't. For 16 years, he was imprisoned, and severe persecution damaged his physical healthy and shortened his life. But he will always remain a winner in our minds.

I'd like to share one episode. One day, we drove to Durban, and I was supposed to take our car for a check and get it fixed, while my father was attending a meeting. I was only 16 and excited to be in a town. So I went to a movie theater and was late to pick him up. I made some false excuses, but he had already called the repair shop and knew the truth.

He said: "It is my fault in the way I raised you that you didn't have enough courage to tell me the truth. I must take responsibility, so I can't get in the car and let you drive me home." He walked back home 18 miles late at night. I drove behind my father, lighting the way on the rough dirt road. The five-and-a-half hours watching him struggle were unforgettable, and I determined never to lie again in my life. This is the power of non-violence.

It would have been easier for him to yell at me. But that is how he taught me what he had learned from his father.

Nagaoka: What is the essence of nonviolent education?

Gandhi: In one word, it's to show the example. Both my grandfather and my father always took initiative in every aspect of their activities. This is one of the dilemmas that many societies have fallen into: If we want our children to do something, we've got to do it ourselves first. So I think it's a process of learning that starts with children but that has to continue all through life. Their minds are very sensitive and honest. They will see the reality of adults' minds, even though we try to hide it. If adults don't take action for non-violence, children will never learn a nonviolent lifestyle. This is the root of modern society's problems.

Nagaoka: Religion must play a very important role, right?

Gandhi: Exactly. My grandfather said that "we will be really free only when we liberate ourselves of the fear that controls us." I wholeheartedly believe that true religious activities, peace movements and humanitarian activities must be used to educate people and free their minds.

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