

King's Dreams: His Beliefs and Philosophy

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Martin Luther King Jr. surprised and captured the attention of a nation during the civil rights movement with his creed of non-violent resistance. As King emerged as a leader in the movement, he put his belief into action and proved that this was an effective method to combat racial segregation.

Son and grandson of black preachers in Atlanta, young Martin studied at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University, where he received a Ph.D in systematic theology.



During his years of study, King began to concentrate on discovering a solution to end social ills. He read up on the writings of Henry David Thoreau and Walter Rauschenbusch, becoming "fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system."

But perhaps the most important sources of his developing philosophy were the Bible and the writings of Mahatma Gandhi.

King took many lessons from Christian teachings, including the cycle of suffering and redemption, turning the other cheek and the teachings of loving one's enemies.

"Love your enemies," King read in the book of Matthew. "Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."

King also relied on the New Testament and the teachings of Indian nationalist leader Mohandas K. Gandhi as he developed his philosophy of non-violence and social justice.

As a student at Crozer, King heard a talk by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, who spoke about the life and teachings of Gandhi following a recent trip to India. King was especially struck by the concept of Satyagraha, a philosophy that resists evil through the active pursuit of truth and non-violent resistance.

"The Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom," King wrote. Gandhi gave King the method for social reform that I had been seeking."



King at Home © Corbis



MLK delivers sermon © Bettmann/Corbis

King's non-violent approach was first tested in 1955 during the Montgomery bus boycott. King decided against using armed bodyguards despite threats on his life and reacted to violence, including the bombing of his home, with compassion.

In the aftermath of the bus boycott, King grew increasingly committed to nonviolence. In his first book *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958), he laid out six key principles of nonviolence.

First, nonviolence is not passive, but requires courage. Second, nonviolence seeks to win the "friendship and understanding" of the opponent, not to humiliate him. Third, evil itself, not the people committing evil acts, should be opposed. Fourth, those committed to nonviolence must be willing to suffer without retaliation as suffering itself can be redemptive.

Fifth, a rejection of hatred, animosity or violence of the spirit, as well as refusal to commit physical violence. The resister should be motivated by love in the sense of the Greek word *agape*, which means "understanding," or "redeeming good will for all men." The sixth principle is that the nonviolent resister must have a "deep faith in the future," stemming from the conviction that "the universe is on the side of justice."

In 1959, King traveled to India to connect more intimately with Gandhi's legacy. He met Gandhi's son and other relatives and visited some of the places where Gandhi had lived.

King won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, but his non-violent approach wasn't always accepted. Some African-Americans

angered at continued violence and injustice not only took steps to protect themselves but also sought revenge.

King became the object of people's frustration.

"The goal of Dr. Martin Luther King is to get Negroes to forgive the people who have brutalized them for 400 years," black activist Malcolm X said in 1963. "But the masses of black people in America today don't go for what Martin Luther King is putting down."

"I began hearing a number of the young militants calling him 'the Lord' derisively," civil rights lawyer Harris Wofford recalled.



Martin Luther King, Jr with Malcolm X © AP

Black Power advocates such as Stokely Carmichael began rejecting non-violence. African Americans in Oakland, California, founded the militant Black Panther Party. Riots periodically broke out in the black sections of major U.S. cities, including Los Angeles, Detroit and Newark.

Ironically, violence ended King's life, just as it had ended Gandhi's. And riots broke out in 60 American cities following King's assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

But King argued until his death that violent revolution was impractical in a multiracial society.

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. The beauty of nonviolence is that in its own way and in its own time it seeks to break the chain reaction of evil."