



# Mohandas K. Gandhi

**Biography Timeline:** **October 2, 1869**, born Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in Porbandar, Kathiawar (present-day Gujarat), India, fourth child of Karamchand Gandhi and Putlibai Gandhi (his father's fourth wife); of the banyan class (businessmen or merchants — "Gandhi" = "grocer"); grows up in home with rich religious diversity, his mother a devout Hindu and his father a friend with Muslims, Parsis, and Jains; **1876**, family moves to Rakjot, India; **1881**, enters high school; finds most religion boring, disdains Hindu ceremonies, and tends toward atheism; **May 1883**, at age 13, marries 14-year old Kasturba Makhanji, according to custom in an arranged child marriage; **1885**, first child is born but lives only a few days; father Karamchand dies; **1887**, barely passes exams at Samaldas College at Bhavnagar, Gujarat; **1888**, first of four sons is born; **September 4, 1888**, after making vows of vegetarianism, refusal of alcohol, and avoidance of promiscuity (in response to mother's emphasis on Jainism principles), travels to England to study law at University College, London; becomes acquainted with Henry Salt's *Plea for Vegetarianism*, reinforcing his dietary commitments; introduced to Western philosophy and Christian religious principles; reads *Bhagavad Gita* and Christian scriptures; **1891**, passes bar and returns to India to practice law; **1891-1893**, lawyering attempts in Mumbai and Rakjot prove to be unsuccessful; **April 1893**, accepts year-long contract from Dada Abdulla & Co., an Indian firm, to serve in Colony of Natal, Durban, South Africa; **May 1893**, is thrown off train in Pietermaritzburg for refusing to leave first-class train cabin; determines he will stay in South Africa and fight discrimination and racism; **August 24, 1894**, founds Natal Indian Congress; **1896**, returns briefly to India to bring Kasturba and children back to South Africa; **January 10, 1897**, upon arriving back in South Africa, white mob attacks him in Durban and tires to lynch him; Gandhi refuses to press charges, citing principle of non-retaliation; **October 1899**, Boer War begins; organizes Indian Ambulance Corps; **1903**, founds newspaper *Indian Opinion*; **1904**, establishes Phoenix settlement, a 100-acre experimental, communitarian farm near Mount Edgecum, north of Durban, modeled partly after Trappist monastery near Durban he had visited nearly a decade before; **1906**, takes vow of *brahmacharya* (sexual abstinence) for both personal and population concerns; reads Tolstoy (including *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*) and Henry David Thoreau's *"On the Duty of Civil Disobedience"*; **September 11, 1906**, speaks at a mass meeting, Empire Theater, Johannesburg; **July 31, 1907**, first use of non-violent non-cooperation by Indians in South Africa, in protest of "Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance," enacting compulsory registration by all Indians; employs the term "*satyagraha*" (soul- or truth- force); **1908-1910**, correspondence with Leo Tolstoy regarding the practical and theological implications of non-violence; **January 10, 1908**, arrested for first time for refusing to carry identification papers; during imprisonment writes to Transvaal colonial secretary Jan Christian Smuts (future Prime Minister of South Africa) and secures meeting; Smuts and Gandhi come to compromise making registration voluntary; **1909**, travels to England to press for rights of South Africa's Indian population; **1910**, with the generosity of Herman Kallenbach, establishes Tolstoy colony on 110-acre farm, 21 miles from Johannesburg; **1913**, after release from one of his many jail terms, appears in a loin cloth (traditional male Indian garb among the poor) which he wears for the rest of his life; **1914**, Indian Relief Act passed in South Africa, banning taxes, allowing for Indian wedding ceremonies, loosening immigration protocols, pardoning resisters; **January 9, 1915**, receives hero's reception upon returning to India; introduced by Gopal Krishna Gokhale to nationalist leaders; speaks at Indian National Congress; **February 1915**, meets Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore who uses Sanskrit term "*Mahatma*" (meaning "great-soul" or sage) to describe who Gandhi has become to the Indian people; **May 25, 1915**, founds Sabarmati Ashram (also known as Gandhi Ashram, Harijan Ashram, or Satyagraha Ashram) at Kochrab, Ahmedabad, Gujarat Province in northwest India; **1918**, declares that ashram accepts all, even "Untouchables," on equal basis; **1919**, begins publishing weekly journal *Young India*; **March 1919**, British pass Rowlatt Act for India, allowing for imprisonment without trial for those suspected of sedition and terrorism in India; **April 13, 1919**, massacre occurs at public garden at Jallianwala Bagh in the city of Amritsar in northern India; **December 1921**, assumes leadership of the Indian National Congress, reorganizing it for national mass appeal and with the goal of Swaraj ("home-rule"); **1922**, sentenced to six years imprisonment for inciting violence at a clash between protesters and police in Chauri Chaura, which had been part of a non-cooperation campaign; **1924**, released from prison after treatment for appendicitis; retreats from overt political activity and tours country, urging Indians to abandon child marriage, untouchability, while promoting the use of the spinning wheel as a tool and symbol for self-reliance and freedom; **1927**, publishes English translation of autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*; **January 26, 1930**, declaration of Indian Independence; begins civil disobedience campaign against the British in India, as empowered by the All-India Congress; **March 12, 1930**, leads 248-mile Salt March to protest British taxation of salt; **April 6, 1930**, Salt March arrives at Dandi on the Gujarat Coast of the Arabian Sea and produces salt by evaporation of seawater in violation of the law as a gesture of

defiance against the British monopoly in salt production; **May 5, 1930**, arrested for Salt March defiance; eventually 60,000 people imprisoned; named "Man of the Year" for 1930 by *Time* magazine; **1931**, Gandhi-Irwin Pact signed; released from prison, sails to London to participate in the Second Round Table Conference on Indian constitutional reform; **1932**, fasts to protest maltreatment of "untouchables"; **1933**, begins publishing weekly newspaper, *Harijan*; **1934**, resigns membership from Congress Party and retires from politics; launches All Indian Village Industries Association; three attempts are made on his life; **February 1936**, Howard Thurman, Sue Bailey Thurman visit on their "Pilgrimage of Friendship" sponsored by the Student Christian Movement, among the group of first African-Americans to meet him; **April 1936**, moves base of operations to small village of Sevagram (Segaon), near Wardha, in central India; **March 3-7, 1939**, a "fast-unto-death" prompts promise of democratic reform in Rakjot; **August 9, 1942**, Gandhi launches "Quit India" movement, advocating India's immediate independence from British rule; arrested, along with most other leaders in All-India Congress; imprisoned for two years at AgaKhan Palace in Pune; **August 15, 1942**, Mahadev Desai, his secretary for more than 25 years, dies of heart attack; **Feb. 22, 1944**, after suffering two heart attacks in January, Kasturba dies in Gandhi's arms while both are still in prison; **May 6, 1944**, released from prison, due to failing health; after conclusion of World War II, participates in talks about India's eventual independence; **August 16, 1946**, Muslim League, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, declares Direct Action Day, resulting in Great Calcutta Riot in which 4,000 people die and 100,000 are rendered homeless; cancels all plans and goes to Calcutta to witness riot-affected areas; **September 2, 1946**, interim government formed; **August 15, 1947**, India gains independence; as India and Pakistan are partitioned, 500,000 killed in ethnic/religious conflicts; **January 13-18, 1948**, last "fast-unto-death" to end Hindu-Muslim violence in Delhi, resolved when leaders renounce violence and agreed-upon payments to Pakistan are made; **January 30, 1948**, while walking to daily prayer meeting in Delhi is assassinated with three shots to the chest by Hindu extremist Nathuram Godse; "He Rama (O God)" are his last words; cremated in New Delhi, ashes apportioned into urns for memorial services across India, some at Allahabad confluence of rivers, another at the palace of the Aga Khan in Pune, another near Jinja, Uganda, the source of the Nile River; **1982**, *Gandhi*, epic biographical movie released, eventually winning 8 Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor; **1999**, HarperCollins designates *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* as one of the "100 Most Important Spiritual Books of the 20th Century;" **June 15, 2007**, United Nations General Assembly establishes October 2 as annual "International Day of Non-Violence," honoring Gandhi and all other champions of nonviolence.

Mohandas K. Gandhi, known the world over as "Mahatma" (Great Soul), was one of the singularly exceptional spiritual and political leaders human history has ever witnessed. Trained as a lawyer, schooled in the classics of Western literature, steeped in political theory and praxis, undergirded by the rituals and traditions of Hinduism, acquainted with all manner of religious practices and spiritual disciplines, Gandhi would become the father of the world's largest democratic nation and the progenitor of startlingly fresh and new ways of thinking about human progress.

E. Stanley Jones regarded the task of summing up Gandhi's life and legacy as an impossible assignment, "like trying to interpret Mount Everest,"(1) and yet biographies and assessments of Gandhi's life and legacy continue unabated. New and significant books about Gandhi are published annually, with the hopes of grasping, somehow, one

more dimension of the little man with a mind as large as the globe and a heart as wide as the cosmos.(2)

Esteem for Gandhi was captured in the various names given to him. India's first Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore gave him the sobriquet "Mahatma," a Sanskrit term meaning "Great-Soul," to describe who Gandhi had become to the Indian people.

"Gandhiji" was the affectionate designation of respect given to him by hundreds of millions of the destitute poor and the elite leaders all over India. "Bapu" (meaning "Father") was a favorite of close associates, regardless of their ages, and the masses, because he was the father of a movement for freedom and dignity, nonviolence as a strategy for change, and eventually the nation of India itself. Whatever he has been called, perhaps Albert Einstein put it best when he wrote, on the occasion of Gandhi's 70th birthday, *"Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."*(3)

While never abandoning his origins as a Hindu, Gandhi was eclectic in his learning and religious practices. He was intimately familiar with the scriptures of all the world's great religions. He carried on a lively correspondence with Leo Tolstoy about the practical and theological implications of non-violence. A Trappist monastery was a model for one of his ashrams in South Africa. When asked by an interlocutor, "What do you think of Western civilization?," he famously replied, "I think it would be a great idea."

Beginning during his time in South Africa, Gandhi collected an interfaith gathering of prayers and songs which he eventually translated into English and used as

a prayer book/hymnal, *Ashram Bhahanavali*, for the twice daily prayer sessions at his Satyagraha ashram in India.(4) Among Gandhi's favorite Christian hymns were "*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*" and "*Lead Kindly Light.*"

Among Gandhi's lastingly important religious distinctives were his fidelity and loyalty to certain ideals and spiritual commitments.

### **Satyagraha**

"Satyagraha" may be roughly translated as truth-force, or truth as a force for goodness and the ultimate foundation for lasting change. More than fifty years after his followers became known as "satyagrahis" in India's independence movement, "satyagraha" was being invoked in debates and controversies about the Vietnam War in the U.S.(5) Gandhi's key principle also found further expression in the world of opera through Phillip Glass' 1980 "*Satyagraha*," which would have revival productions in London and New York more than a quarter century later. And, nearly a century after "satyagraha" was a regular part of India's political calculus, the Bollywood film industry released a depiction of a 21st century application of Gandhi's ideal in a political thriller entitled "*Satyagraha - Democracy Under Fire.*" "Satyagraha" can easily be regarded as Gandhi's grandest intellectual bequest in the evolution of human thought.

### **Ahimsa**

"Ahimsa" is nonviolence. Gandhi's experimentation with nonviolence as a way of life and as a strategy for social change roughly paralleled Albert Schweitzer's development of "reverence for life." Arguments have raged over the years about the practicality of nonviolence, and yet, beginning with Gandhi in South Africa and in India, it has been employed to achieve massive social uplift and political transformation

around the world. Howard Thurman and his wife Sue Bailey Thurman, were among the first group of African-Americans ever to meet with Gandhi in India and, thereafter, were the initial persons responsible for bringing Gandhian nonviolence back to America as a methodology for social change. When the Thurmans met with Gandhi in Bardoli, Gajarut, Gandhi asked them if he might hear a particular spiritual, *“Were You There?”*, “because he believed it “gets to the root of the experience of the entire human race, under the spread of the healing wings of suffering.”(6) And so they sang *“Were You There.”* In response to which Gandhi commented, presciently, “... it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world.”(7)

### **No One Is Untouchable - Everyone Is Harijan**

For Gandhi, a bold, unflinching, loving encounter with others is necessary for relating to the divine. “To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest creatures as oneself.”(8) “Harijan,” (Child of God) was his term for India’s so-called untouchable caste. Even during dire straits and dispiriting defeats, Gandhi clung to loving all creation, especially those most vulnerable and at risk, as his premier ideal: “When I despair I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murders and for a time they seem invincible. But in the end they always fall. Think of it. Always.”(9)

### ***Praying with Gandhi - Suggestions for Use***

Day 1 **Heart and Words** – *“It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.”*(10) Cease your worry about the words you pray today. Instead,

focus on having a heart that is open to God's powerful presence. Offer to God what is in your heart for blessing.

- Day 2 **New Definitions of and Fresh Experiments with Ancient Verities** – Gandhi defined *“satyagraha”* as “truth force” or “holding on to the truth.” Jesus declared “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:32) Seek God's guidance about moments and relationships in which your truthfulness can be a healing, ennobling force for the benefit of others.
- Day 3 **Sacrifice Your Own Needs for the Fulfillment of Others** – Pray about the places and people in your daily life in which it might be possible to make a sacrifice for the betterment of others. Consider: your family, your friendships, your faith involvements, your participation in the welfare of the wider community, etc. Now consider how you might make such a sacrifice with complete enjoyment as an ultimate goal for the enactment of such sacrifice.
- Day 4 **Choosing**– Ultimately, our daily walk with God is about choosing which path to follow. Gandhi highlighted this axiom in his autobiography: “The useful and the useless must, like good and evil generally, go on together, and man must make his choice.”(11) Pray today that God will guide you to choose the useful and the good.
- Day 5 **Immortal, Invisible Essence** - A meditation in *Ashram Bhahanavali*, the prayerbook/hymnal Gandhi used at his ashram, declares:  
*There is an abode which is beyond intellect.  
Though the mind is swift like the wind it cannot overtake it.  
This immortal, indivisible essence  
pervades everything movable and immovable.  
It has made this universe,  
there is not an atom where it is not,  
but by the grace of a true guru it is attainable.  
Why go in search of it here and there when it is in you?* (12)  
Many would say that Gandhi is describing the Spirit of God, which Jesus also declared as “dwelling within you.” Pray today for the courage to discover, attain, and live by the powerful truth that God's spirit can impart to you.
- Day 6 **Harijan**– Consider those in your experience who might be considered or are already condemned as “untouchable” in the society in which you dwell. Now picture them before you and say the word “Harijans” (Children of God). Say the word out loud several times a time as a prayer of blessing for those you know and those unknown to you who labor under the stigma of being “untouchable.”
- Day 7 **Singing a Favorite Spiritual of Gandhi's** -- Sing "*Were You There,*" "*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,*" or "*Lead Kindly Light,*" as a prayer to imbue your journey in faith today.

## NOTES

- (1) E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1948), p. 5.
- (2) For two excellent examples of the breadth and the depth of books about Gandhi, see especially Joseph Lelyveld, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011) and Arvind Sharma, *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2013).
- (3) This quote is cited widely by Gandhi enthusiasts and scholars alike, but with hardly any specific descriptions for exactly when and where Einstein conveyed this outstanding statement of his admiration for Gandhi. See William L. Shirer, *Gandhi: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 9, 11; see also the dramatic use of the quote in Richard Attenborough's 1982 Academy Award-winning movie *Gandhi* as well as at <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/452888-on-the-occasion-of-mahatma-gandhi-s-70th-birthday-generations-to>.
- (4) Mohandas K. Gandhi, ed. by John Strohmeier, *Book of Prayers* (California: Berkeley Hills Press, 1999), esp. pp. 7-9.
- (5) In October of 1971, while in college in Ft. Worth, Texas, the author first heard the term "satyagraha" used by David Harris, one of the founders and chief leaders of Resistance, an organization opposed to the draft during the Vietnam War.
- (6) Cited in Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), p. 112.
- (7) Howard Thurman, *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman, Volume I, My People Need Me, June 1918-March 1936*, Walter Earl Fluker, editor (Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009), p.337.
- (8) Mahatma Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 422.
- (9) This famous statement has been quoted in countless books, and was used in a dramatic high point in Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi*. However, despite numerous references to the statement being included in Gandhi's autobiography, an exact source anywhere within Gandhi's canon has yet to be found.
- (10) Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Young India*, January 23, 1930, p. 25.
- (11) Gandhi, *An Autobiography: My Experiments with Truth*, p. 456.
- (12) Mohandas K. Gandhi, ed. by John Strohmeier, *Book of Prayers* (California: Berkeley Hills Press, 1999), p. 128.

## FOR FURTHER READING, STUDY, & REFLECTION

- Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969)
- Mahatma Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (New York: Dover, 1983),(Boston: Beacon, 1994)
- Mahatma Gandhi, edited by Robert Ellsberg, *Gandhi on Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991)
- Mohandas K. Gandhi, edited by John Strohmeier, *Book of Prayers* (California: Berkeley Hills Press, 1999)
- Joseph Lelyveld, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011)
- Arvind Sharma, *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2013)