

Reflections on the Hands-on Gandhian Retreat
January 11-17, 2009
Sponsored by the Institute of World Culture
Held at and in Collaboration with La Casa de Maria Retreat Center

Together with retreat leader Shashi Tyagi from India, seventeen retreat participants from across America, of various ages and backgrounds, approximated a brief Gandhian ashram living experience here in Santa Barbara between January 11 and 17, 2009. As the Institute of World Culture's first Aim enjoins us to do, we explored a classical tradition of the East – namely, life in an ashram – and its continuing relevance to emerging modes and patterns of living. We found the discipline of the ashram to be liberating and the comradeship to engender greater inner reflection. All participants eagerly undertook their 'bread labor' of two hours a day of manual work, plus meal preparation and clean-up, without hesitation. The practical work brought to life our conceptual study of Gandhi's ideas.

This event harmoniously blended youthful inspiration, the hard-won experience of a lifetime of practice, and a depth of philosophical understanding. The students who attended the Hands-On Gandhian Retreat, including Colorado College senior Sandhya Tillotson, who first envisioned the event, provided the motivation to make our way into a more peaceful, sustainable tomorrow. Shashi Tyagi, of the non-profit organization GRAVIS in Rajasthan, led by example, having herself given up most worldly comforts decades ago to devote her life to Gandhian service - *sarvodaya* - of India's rural poor. Institute of World Culture members, who were well-versed in the seminal book *the Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* by the Institute's Founder President Raghavan Iyer, provided the conceptual underpinnings of the retreat. The elders in attendance graced the entire event, smoothing any rough edges with a smile, a comforting pat, a word-to-the-wise, a quick mop to a dirty floor, or a well-placed compliment.

Retreat participants woke to a 5:55 am gong every morning and began the day at 6:30 am with one of Gandhi's favorite multi-cultural prayers. We ate a healthy breakfast prepared by retreat members, then studied Gandhi's thought and life.

Each study session started by reading one or two of the 11 vows taken in Gandhi's ashrams: *Nonviolence, Truth, Non Stealing, Chastity, Non-possession, Bread Labor, Control of the Palate, Fearlessness, Tolerance of all Religions, Local Production, and Removal of Untouchability*. Next, one of several visiting Institute members gave a brief summary of one of our key Gandhian concepts:

- Satya: Truth, as Reality, which unites all of us since no human concept or religion can be higher than Truth itself – that which is real, authentic, genuine, enduring and sustaining
- Ahimsa: negation of the will to harm in thought, speech and deed – non-violence in an active, rather than passive, sense of extending goodwill
- Swaraj: self-rule, in the sense of self-discipline
- Satyagraha: truth-work, implying soul-force – holding onto truth in the midst of untruth

- Bread Labor: everyone doing enough physical labor for one's food, and devoting one's intellectual endeavors to the benefit of humankind, not to amassing personal wealth
- Trusteeship: holding all spiritual, mental and physical resources in trust for the good of all
- Sarvodaya: the uplift of all, but the least first.

Shashi ji followed up each summary with historical examples of these concepts being enacted by Gandhi or his followers, including Venoba Bhave and GRAVIS workers. Participants engaged in discussion. In closing, we heard a biographical passage from Eknath Easwaran's book *Gandhi the Man*.

Before heading out to work, we warmed up with a brief hatha yoga session. Construction of a stone-lined labyrinth went "from above, below", starting with an inspirational idea before the manual labor began. One participant commented that the labyrinth (modeled after the one on the stone floor of the Chartres Cathedral in France) was a symbol of meditation itself: you wind your way into the center, and begin anticipating that you are almost there, only to get flung out to the circumference again as soon as the ego gets excited; it takes several windings in and out until you can finally reach the center point of stillness. Participants located, lifted and placed hundreds of stones and boulders to create the labyrinth – surprising themselves by week's end with their collective result.

Older participants who couldn't do as much heavy construction work manned the breakfast clean-up, vegetable collection in the organic garden and lunch-making tasks. After our morning exertions, lunch and early afternoon free time felt well-earned. The practical skills sessions from 3-5 pm in the afternoon constituted the hands-on learning of sustainable skills and peace-making. Outside speakers came to show real life examples of sustainable living, such as Permaculture, bee keeping, and cob building, as well as peace making skills, such as mending broken communities in Liberia, which is the mission of the visiting local organization "everyday gandhis."

Evenings were a time to open the retreat to the general community. Guests joined many of our simple, delicious dinners, with Asian, Indian, Iranian, Californian and Italian cuisine prepared by the excellent participant cooks. (Meals were free of meat, eggs, and usually dessert.) We started the week's evening program with scenes from Richard Attenborough's memorable 1982 film *Gandhi*. Other evening forums featured outside speakers whose topics included "Modern Man and Woman: What Would Gandhi Think?", "Three Warriors: the Militarist, the Terrorist and the Gandhian", and "How Should We Care for Our Bodies – Acupuncture & Gandhi's Nature Cure". Most evenings ended with inspirational songs by musically talented members of the Institute of World Culture.

The highlight of the retreat for many was the initiation ceremony for the labyrinth on the final morning, after the last stone had been moved into place. Retreat members, La Casa de Maria staff and friends all filed silently through the new labyrinth, nearly brushing shoulders as we wound through fold after fold of the circulating pathway. Finally, all of us reached the flower-petalled center. Shashi ji suggested that we sing the American

gospel of peace and civil rights movements' fame "We Shall Overcome". An African-American woman who had just arrived for a Martin Luther King, jr. retreat at La Casa de Maria spontaneously offered to lead the verses, and a heartfelt rendition ensued. We learned how appropriate it was that a retreat on King would follow one on Gandhi, when we heard she told us that Gandhi had ever been an inspiration to Dr. King. As we silently followed the labyrinth's path back out into the world, we felt enriched by our week's study of this slight man, Mahatma Gandhi, whose non-violent accomplishments seemed larger than life and yet intimately touched each of our lives. We had worked together to create a meditation labyrinth...friendships...community. As Shashi ji, our beloved retreat leader concluded: "People spent the whole week with happiness."

Renée Tillotson
Board Member and Retreat Participant

Participants' Comments

We gained a great deal through the balance of tasks and variation of focus, such as labor vs. stillness; outdoors vs. a classroom setting.

I was grateful for the amount of time and attention to detail put into the schedule and planning.

There is that song "And they will know we are Christians by our love" and as I think most any outside observer would pick up on, the guiding and bonding force above all agendas, guidelines, intentions and communications was undoubtedly Love. This is the most miraculous evidence and proof of the validity and homage to the message and path Gandhi gave his life for and made his life work.

I gained renewed faith in young people 18-30 – their idealism, charity, simplicity, and activism inspire me to keep going. (from a 76 year old participant)

The food was so wonderful and inspiring. How can I eat this way at home?

We had good cooks, and folks didn't mind leftovers.

It was-so well-organized with LOTS OF HEART.

The excitement and joy of working and thinking together with such a diverse group was memorable and a blessing.

The sense of community at the table is of equal importance to the learning sessions and bread labor.

I gained a sense of community and recognized the power and energy of a like-minded group. But more than that, I was able to observe and meet and share with a group of

extraordinarily influential people who inspire me to bring this energy to a wider community. The knowledge and the everyday examples of people practicing a Gandhian lifestyle is something that will stay with me.

The way this retreat unfolded was a great success. I believe it is a model to demonstrate the way instincts, collaboration, and individuals initiating can lead to magic.

All the activities and lectures were very intriguing. Please keep taking care of our bodies (acupuncture and nature cure) and cob building was GREAT and the food and Permaculture. I really enjoyed our speakers.

Thank You for Everything!

I was inspired to hear Shashi ji's real life experience carrying on the work Gandhi preached and practiced himself.

I was inspired throughout the week by the continuous streams of generosity flowing in. They nourished my hope and gave me courage when I was in doubt. The entire retreat was created in the spirit of giving and volunteerism that Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave would have loved, and I think it was received and engaged in by the participants in like spirit.

I was amazed and awed by our work on the labyrinth. It felt as though we truly earned our bread every day.

My personal experience at the Gandhi Retreat was heartfelt. I feel that I benefitted from this retreat because I had the opportunity to participate in a culturally diverse group who all shared the common desire to make the world a better place by implementing peaceful strategies to help people more effectively and inclusively create a community of change, compassion, trust, sharing resources, moving in a direction of simplicity and gratitude.

The construction of the labyrinth was an excellent example of what can be accomplished when you have a group working together. The physical exertion created a good balance in the activities of the day

The tranquility eases the body; the bread labor softens the ego; the sister and brotherhood warms the heart.

I've achieved everything I wanted and need in the material world. This retreat has made me want something bigger.

Besides a fabulous group of new friends, I got great insight on life. Last year saw storm after storm of challenges, loss, grief and trying times, leaving me totally lost and confused. I knew this retreat would bring me hope about the future, but wasn't sure how. Although I still don't know what my next step will be exactly, I have a pretty good idea – maybe the Mahatma Gandhi School for Social Justice?

This was a great retreat and I hope that I am able to continue this as my life's mission. Thanks!

The most powerful workshop for me was the one on Friday afternoon with the everyday Gandhis. To hear about their experiences with peace making and the way they live daily with nonviolence was very moving. It brought what we were learning theoretically down to a workable but still incredible level. They were such a wonderful group to bring into our circle.

I think we should have worked harder to really get people to understand the key concepts through more reading (which I couldn't find time for). It was great to have Kirk, Cliff, Maurice, Carolyn and Robert give short introductions of the topics. They had really done their homework.

The evening forums on Women with Carolyn and Shashi ji and on Warriors with Manou and Shashi ji were thought-provoking and profound.

I'm so glad the cob builders got to come! Hooray! Perhaps I will work with them at some point! Caitlin Bergman's Permaculture workshop was also wonderful.

I am happy that people are leaving with happiness and emotions.

This retreat has renewed my hope and faith in humanity. (from a 19 year old participant)

Where do we go from here?
