

# MARTIN LUTHER KING JR & AHIMSA

Mahavir teachings emphasised the importance of Ahimsa – Non-Violence, tolerance, compassion, and the ecological interdependency of all living organisms, including the environment. The most important of Mahavir’s teaching is arguably the principle of Ahimsa - Non-Violence in thought, word and deed - do not think violent thoughts, speak violent words or do violent acts. Mahavir postulated this principle, more than 2500 years ago, which has since then inspired countless individuals and movements throughout history, including Mahatma Gandhi’s nonviolent resistance movement in India and Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil rights movement in the United States. Most people will be aware that Martin Luther King Jr was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, in his ideas of nonviolent passive resistance.

**Martin Luther King Day – also known as MLK Day** is celebrated each year on the Third Monday of January, close to Dr King’s birthday on 15th January. The day celebrates Dr King’s contribution to the civil rights movement in the USA and, is a day of reflection.

On reflection, we can say that on this day, not only are we honouring Dr King – the Christian civil rights pioneer for his nonviolent resistance, but by implication we also honour Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu whose wisdom and experience Dr King learnt from. We also honour Jainism, a religion through its doctrine of non-violence has subtly influenced social change across centuries and nations, thereby extending its historical and cultural influence far beyond its size and location in India.

M K Gandhi was born in Gujarat, India. The impact of Jainism on Gandhi was quite profound and played a significant role in his spiritual as well political journey. Gandhi was influenced by the overall Jain environment in Gujarat, his



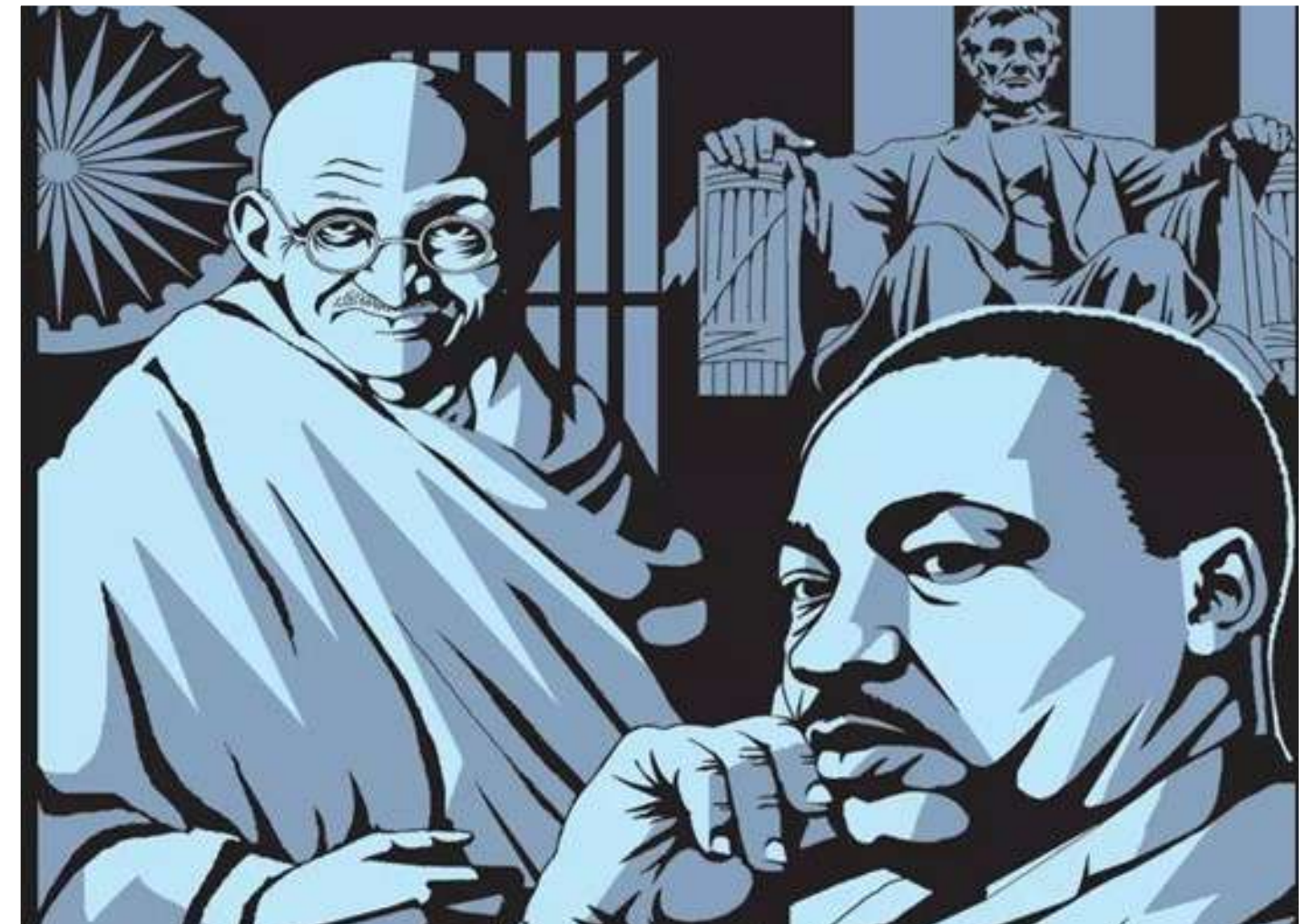
mother Putalibai's association with Jainism and his interactions with prominent Jains like Shrimad Rajchandra, often referred to as Gandhi's spiritual guru and Virchand R Gandhi, fellow lawyer who would go on to represent the Jain tradition at the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.

Gandhi was a Jain in spirit as his life encapsulated qualities such as non-violence, fearlessness, truth, forgiveness, non-possessiveness and simplicity, celibacy, vegetarianism, self-discipline, tolerance and religious pluralism. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance or satyagraha was greatly influenced by Jain principles of ahimsa, truth-seeking, simplicity, self-discipline, and selfless service.

Gandhi viewed Ahimsa not only of an ethical importance but recognised its political importance in securing India's freedom from British rule. Gandhi's greatest contribution to Jainism was that he made Jain principles practical by applying them on a large-scale involving mass. He was the first man to apply Jain principle of ahimsa to solve social and political problems of his time.

Martin Luther King Jr (born Michael King Jr on 15 January 1929) was an American Baptist minister, activist, and political philosopher who was one of the most prominent leaders in the civil rights movement in USA. He was a great personality, excelled academically and had great aptitude for leadership and activism.

M L King helped in establishing the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) and was a prominent leader in the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). M.L King led the Montgomery Bus



**"No religion of the world has explained the principle of non-violence so deeply and systematically, with its applicability in life as in Jainism. Bhagwan Mahaveer is sure to be respected as the greatest authority on non-violence"**

**"I say with conviction that the doctrine for which the name of Lord Mahavir is glorified nowadays is the doctrine of Ahimsa. If anyone has practiced to the fullest extent and has propagated most the doctrine of Ahimsa, it was Mahavira"**





Boycott of 1955 which opposed the Montgomery Alabama transit segregation policy, and played a pivotal role in the 1963 March on Washington where he delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

During the less than 13 years of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s leadership of the modern American Civil Rights Movement, from December 1955 until April 4, 1968, when he was assassinated, African Americans achieved more genuine progress toward racial equality in America than the previous 350 years had produced.

As a student, King discussed Gandhi philosophy of non-violent passive resistance. Gandhi was born 60 years before King and died when King was very young, and therefore never met. However, King travelled to India in 1959 at the invitation of the Gandhi Memorial Trust to observe first hand the strategies and impact of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence - a trip that may have helped shape the American political and social structure forever.

Gandhi’s work and philosophy greatly impacted King, who credited Gandhi as “the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change.” In the civil rights movement, whilst others were advocating for freedom by “any means necessary,” including violence, King used the power of words and acts of nonviolent resistance, such as protests, grassroots organizing, and civil disobedience to achieve seemingly impossible goals, just as M K Gandhi had achieved in India.

Non-violence was never just a clever political ‘policy’ but an unshakeable moral principle, force and non-negotiable to the last. Gandhi and King, often fell out with their respective close associates like Nehru and James Lawson, a cleric who viewed Ahimsa as a policy to be employed with deliberate craft or



one that could be occasionally abandoned. However, both these leaders maintained their belief in ahimsa with religious fervour.

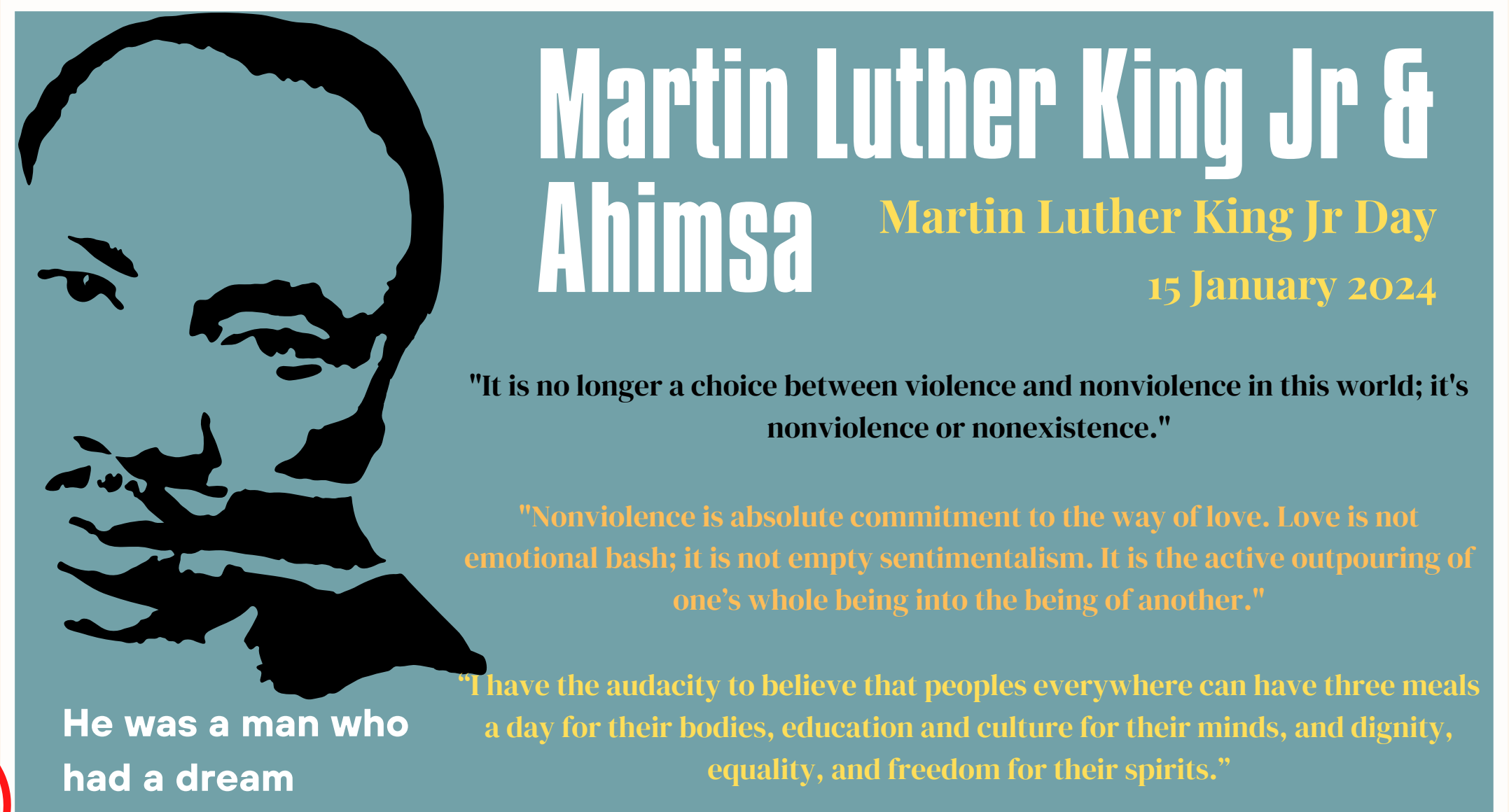
Like Mahatma Gandhi, Dr King is now rightly acknowledged as one of the greatest orators of our time. His “I Have a Dream” speech, Nobel Peace Prize lecture and “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” are among the most revered orations and writings in the English language. Dr. King is widely regarded as America’s pre-eminent advocate of nonviolence and one of the greatest nonviolent leaders in world history.

Sadly, both these apostles of non-violence and peace were brutally assassinated. Gandhi departed this world, whispering “Hey Ram”, whilst King, unbeknownst that it would be seconds before he would be shot, requested the famous saxophonist, Ben Branch to play ‘real pretty’ his favourite hymn – “Take my hand precious Lord”. I am sure both were addressing the same God.

Gandhi’s non-violence and Jainism in some respect stand as parallel terms. They are not only parallel but are so intertwined that one of it is incomplete without the other. Due to Gandhi inspiration and by Dr King’s action and leadership, these Jain doctrines of non-violence, tolerance, forgiveness saw light in USA and the world.

Mahavir’s teaching of non-violence will be relevant forever as it makes sense. Dr King achieved a lot, but the ‘dream’ and fight for civil rights continues in USA and elsewhere. Today we see war and unrest in many nations – now is the time to renew our commitment, politically, economically and culturally, to the wisdom of non-violence. Non-violence encourages peace and harmony in the society. Gandhi and Dr King both advocated Jainism belief in non-violence and “live and Let Live”.

Jainism emphasizes compassion, kindness, respect for others and selfless service (seva) to others, reflecting the interconnectedness of all beings. Martin Luther King Jr Day – MLK Day is a holiday in USA during which individuals and organisations undertake volunteer efforts (Seva) – often referred to as MLK Day of Service to continue his legacy.



**Martin Luther King Jr & Ahimsa**

**Martin Luther King Jr Day**  
**15 January 2024**

"It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence."

"Nonviolence is absolute commitment to the way of love. Love is not emotional bash; it is not empty sentimentalism. It is the active outpouring of one's whole being into the being of another."

"I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits."

**He was a man who had a dream**



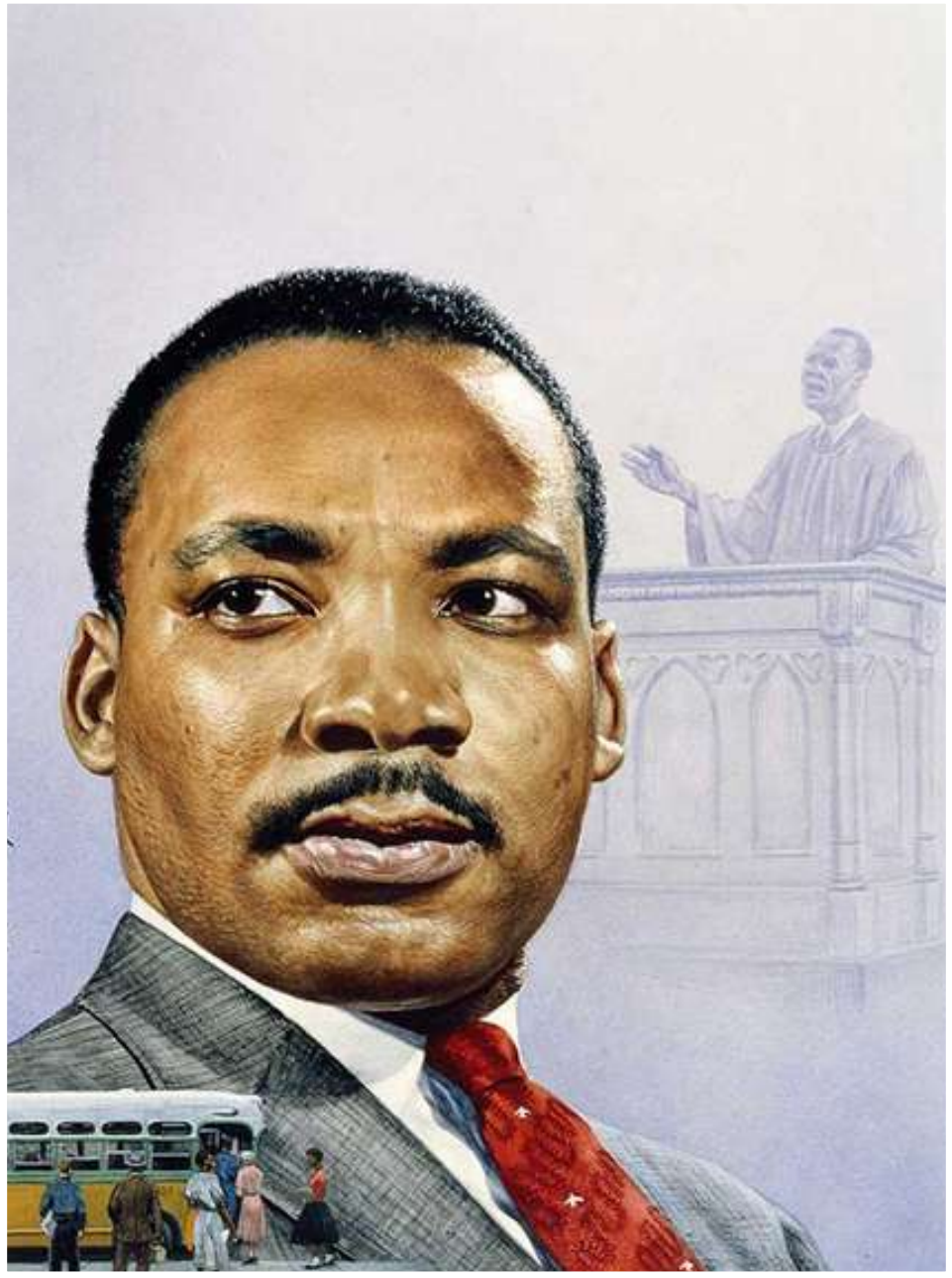


# MARTIN LUTHER KING JR



In this modern age, as we analyse Jainism, we must try to see its lasting effects on the world. True Jainism deals with the self and how to free one's soul from the karmic cycle. In trying to promote good actions for oneself, one also brings good to others. The great people of our time become great by devotion to others. Mahavir, in his quest for nirvana, taught others along the way and showed them his insights. This is how religion has been passed down from generation to generation.

These special people who have influenced the lives of many have been rare in history, but their impact has been tremendous. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, the founder of the non-violent protest, transformed this simple idea into a vehicle for monumental change by bringing about the independence of India. Also, Mother Teresa, who cared for thousands of sick and hungry people through service for others. Similarly, another great leader of our time, the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr, changed America society by fighting for equal rights for people of colour.



Martin Luther King Jr. by Boris Chaliapin (1904-1979)

The time when Martin Luther King lived, the 1960s, was a very turbulent time in the history of America. In the South, African American people did not enjoy the same rights as citizens of the white population. They could not attend the same schools, eat at the same restaurant, use the same toilets, even drink from the same drinking fountains. Blacks even had to give up seats on buses to the whites, simply because of the colour of their skin. The black population was blatantly being oppressed, and many were becoming fed up with the situation. In all of the turmoil, a young man rose up to defend his community. King became the leader of the national civil rights movement.

Although many were angry to fight back with fists, King urged his followers to follow Ghandiji's principle of nonviolent protest. He had also read about the Jain principle of Ahimsa. When crowds gathered, King urged his followers to fight with words. His lectures and remarks stirred the concern and sparked the conscience of a generation; the movement and marches he led



This Article was first published in  
Oshwal News



brought significant changes in the fabric of American life; his courageous and selfless devotion gave direction to thirteen years of civil rights activities, his charismatic leadership inspired men in women, young and old, in the nation and abroad.

When we compare the principle of Jainism, to the ideals that King held, we see many in common. He preached non-violence worldwide. In Montgomery, Alabama, King and other leaders organised a boycott of buses by the black population Of the city in protest to the racist bus laws. He did not call on his followers to fight back, but rather told them to practise self-control, another pillar of Jain values. In the hardest of times, he asked people not to say any hateful words, or perform any actions of

anger. He also took part in sit-ins where students defiantly sat at lunch counters where only whites were allowed. He told the protesters not to even raise a finger, even while they were being beaten. Jain Teachings tell us that it is self-control we must use to hold back our urges, when we want something most - to strike someone who is hurting us, to steal when we are in need, to curse when we're being ridiculed - these are all actions we can only prevent through self-control.

King's quest for equality was portrayed in his famous speech during the March on Washington DC, show a protest to the nation of this racist law and segregation practises. Many of King's ideas that All Souls are equal and love for all, are also told in Jain teachings.

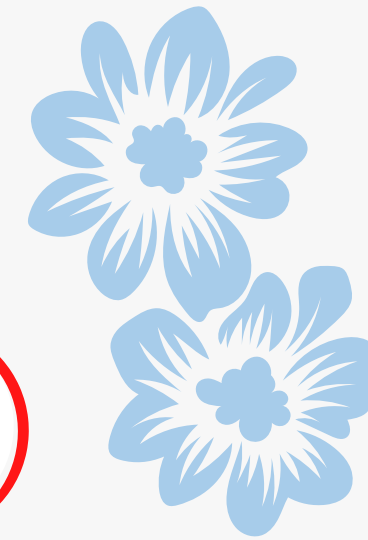
*"I have a dream that one day, on the hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners, will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*

*I have a dream that one day in the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an Oasis of freedom and justice.*

*I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will be not judged by the colour of this skin but by the content of their character.*

*I have a dream today."*

*I have a dream speech delivered by King  
in Washington DC August 28, 1963*



Perhaps the greatest relation between Dr King and Jainism, can be explained in the great Jain prayer *“Maitri Bhavanu”* by the Late Pujya Shree Chitrabhanuji

May the sacred stream of amity flow forever in my heart.

May the universe prosper, such is my cherished desire.

May my heart sing with ecstasy at the sight of the virtuous.

May my life be an offering at their feet.

May my heart bleed at the sight of the wretched, the cruel, the irreligious.

May tears of compassion flow from my eyes.

May I always be there to show the path to the pathless wanderers of life.

Yet if they should not hearken to me, May I bide in patience.

May the spirit of goodwill enter all our hearts.

May we all sing in chorus the immortal song of human concord.

This was King's dream, and this is what he lived his life for. His philosophy of nonviolent direct action and his strategies for rational and non-destructive social change galvanised the conscience of the American nation and reordered its priorities. His wisdom, his words, his action, his commitment, and his dreams for a new cast of life are intertwined with the American experience and the world at large. Although the struggle still continues unfortunately, King did much to make change.

Article Source: Courtesy of The University of Michigan (Jain Grp)  
(With some additional material by the then Editor (Me))



## M.L.K Quotes



“Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon. Indeed it is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and enables the man who wields it.”



"Life's most persistent and urgent question, 'What are you doing for others?'"



"Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality."