Mexico 2017 Program Report

09-18 June 2017
Rancho La Verdad, Nuevo León, Mexico
The daily news reports no shortage of leaders who champion certainty, immediacy and defensiveness. And we see no shortage of their essential tools: threat, coercion and harm. For those who desire a different approach to social change, Satyagraha Institute offers a new program to train leaders in the traditions of nonviolence.

The June 2017 Satyagraha Institute brought together 33 people from 5 nations to Nuevo León, Mexico. Participants met for 10 days in a beautiful setting at Rancho La Verdad. This 2017 June event was the second Institute in Mexico, after the one of 2016 in Cuetzalan, Puebla.
The Satyagraha Institute promotes the uplift of all beings by cultivating leadership in the pursuit of truth and nonviolence.

Mohandas Gandhi, who famously experimented with the possibilities of nonviolence, coined the Sanskrit term satyagraha to identify a method of social change. Gandhi proposed that satya (truth) combined with agraha (firmness) creates a useful social power that does not rely on harming others. Gandhi often referred to this power as “truth-force.”

Satyagraha is a way of directly engaging with others to work out the difficult aspects of life without resorting to coercion, harm, or ill intention. Satyagraha is the social power which arises when we act with kindness, respect, patience, generosity, and selfless service.
Goal One

To increase the number of leaders trained in the traditions of nonviolence.

Our world suffers for lack of leaders rooted in the traditions of nonviolence. When conflicts arise, many leaders teach us to wield threats, coercion, and harm. When unfamiliar perspectives disturb, many leaders rally us to certainty and defensiveness. When decisions must be made, many leaders encourage us to value self-interest, immediacy, and possession. As we follow these guides, the fabric of our communities weaken, the resources of our earth become misused and depleted, and life becomes more difficult for all of us. Our goal is to create a different future by training leaders in the traditions of nonviolence.
Goal Two

To strengthen the community of practitioners, teachers and future leaders who are committed to experimenting with satyagraha in their work.

Existing and upcoming leaders in our various communities have little opportunity to spend quality time with mentors in nonviolence. Our goal is to create a place where leaders can build relationships with mentors who are familiar with the knowledge, skills, and inner life associated with nonviolent social change.
Goal Three

To produce the premiere training opportunity for exploring how to create social change using the principles and tools of satyagraha.

Training in nonviolence typically follows one of three valuable traditions: In the academic tradition, many colleges and universities offer programs in peace and justice studies. These programs are essential to educating our future leaders about the theory, history, and application of nonviolent social change.

In the activist tradition, a variety of organizations offer programs to train community organizers how to implement successful campaigns. If we want nonviolent social change to be more than just a dream, we need to invest in developing the skills, techniques, and strategies which these programs set forth.

In religious traditions around the globe, adherents are taught that by observing certain principles and values, we build a peaceful world. Even with our best theory and skills, we cannot create nonviolent social change without tending to matters such as respect, forgiveness, patience, and sensitivity to the well-being of our adversaries.

These three traditions are all necessary. Taken independently, however, they each have their weaknesses. Without academic rigor, activists and religious adherents miss the benefits of critical analysis and historical insight. Without activist skill, academics and religious adherents lack the competence to convert understanding and vision into reality. And without attention to the inner life, academics and activists risk leaving behind our most potent catalysts for transforming relationships and communities.

Our goal is to provide a unique training opportunity by integrating the best of these three traditions, rooting our program in attention to scholarship, attention to strategy, and attention to the inner life.
The 10-day program included a variety of faculty and training styles. The daily Schedule typically ran from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. with opportunities for rest, reflection and socializing.

Morning, afternoon and evening seminars formed the core of the program. Additionally, each morning, the group gathered for meditation and discussion on the inner life. Each afternoon, there were bread labour and service activities, in the spirit of Gandhian ashrams, where each participant made some manual labour to support the basic needs of the community.

One day was devoted to field trips with opportunities to learn from people, places, organizations and projects related to our theme, in addition to visits from different people who shared their work and experiences with us.
Several group sessions with M.P. Mathai, our Gandhian scholar from India, focused on the nature of Satyagraha and a Gandhian Philosophy of Life; workshops with local activists and resource people and different activities such as movie discussions were the core of the Mexico Institute, among bread labour and field visit tasks.

Nonviolence, Satyagraha, Gandhi’s life, Mediation, Conflict, Direct Action, Swadeshi, Sarvodaya. Spirituality, Today’s Struggles, Non cooperation, Civil Resistance, Good living in Mesoamerica and some other topics were studied in a traditional way and also with some games and activities. Case studies were taken to the classroom and analyzed by the participants as a way to develop skills and apply the knowledge acquired in the Institute. By the end of each session, some questions were raised by the participants and discussed in the group and/or answered by the teachers.
Discovering Our Own Country: Open Eyes, Open Hearts

There are realities that seem too far from others in Mexico, such as poverty, urban violence and drugs. The Institute participants, from different parts of Mexico and even Colombia and Guatemala had the chance, accompanied by the faculties from Mexico, India and the United States to visit some areas in Monterrey City where violence happens every day and people are living in a state of poverty, exposed to drugs and a lack of good education. We visited an NGO that is working for Peace in this area and we visited along with them a community; spoke to the women there, heard their stories, and finally visited another NGO that works with gangs or “clikas” –as they call themselves- helping in the process of empowerment and development of tools for education and work.

Hearing from people, talking with the kids, seeing their schools and having the chance to have a heart-to-heart conversation with some of the clikas’ guys was absolutely significant for all the participants. Discovering the situation in which our Mexican fellows are living, exposed to the use of drugs, suffering from violence and practically having their dreams discarded, was such a meaningful experience, bringing about a deep apprenticeship and raising a strong commitment to take action.
Exploring the Inner Life

One of the primary emphases of the Institute is enabling participants to deepen their spiritual roots, whatever their religious tradition, or even if they have none. Gandhi said, “Prayer is the key of the morning…properly understood and applied it is the most potent instrument of action”.

Each day of the Institute began with a focus on the Inner Life. There was an opportunity for everyone to gather together for silence, to reflect on the words and ideas of nonviolent leaders who went before us. Then there was a chance to share with a few others personal experiences related to the theme of the day. The theme might be Practicing Patience, Offering Generosity or Being Fearless.

Carl Kline guided this activity, talking about some personal experiences or telling a significant story. Morning conversations were the perfect time for identifying our own personal strengths and needs so we could work on them during the day, accompanied by our friends.
Community Life

As part of the community life, participants had the chance to spend free time together developing different activities, such as Tai Chi sessions, running mornings, project-creation and even getting into a pool! Free time was the best moment to strengthen relationships, work on projects and have fun.

Since the moment participants arrived to Rancho La Verdad, putting together the pieces to assemble the pool was a chance to talk and laugh. After that, filling the pool with water was an adventure, the water wasn’t what we expected and there were some insects and a funny smell, yet it was fun and people enjoyed it!

Many birthdays were celebrated during the Institute, it’s even hard to remember how many of them, but every time there was one, we didn’t lose the opportunity to celebrate with a big cake and the traditional Mexican birthday song “Las Mañanitas”. One of our faculty members even said “I’m thinking of changing my birthday to one of these days!” Rancho La Verdad is located outside Monterrey City in a region where people normally do farming, especially orange and lemon agriculture and Rancho La Verdad is no exception; besides having some livestock, this Rancho now has a plantation of more than 2,000 lemon trees which were offloaded by the participants and taken care of for the first days there, before being planted.

On the last night there was a cultural show with a music group of truly talented Mexican musicians; people danced, sang, ate and shared stories listening to such wonderful music and delighted by the food and weather.
Bread Labour

As part of the community life, participants agreed on collaborating in different activities that were needed for satisfying group basic needs, such as cleaning, helping in the kitchen, washing dishes, fixing the classroom, watering plants, among others. This practice is inspired by Gandhian principles in the ashrams, where everyone has to participate in taking care of the community and be part of the duties that have to be completed.
Art and Peace

Art is one of the best ways in which human beings express their feelings and emotions. It is also a way to send a message to others. Satyagraha Institute participants decided to create a mural to portray the way peace is conceived by this community. With the expertise and guidance of Kolly, a passionate and talented local graffiti artist, a meaningful and beautiful painting was created on one of the buildings of Rancho La Verdad. This wall is visible from outside, so local people can see it as they pass by.

All the colors represent love, nonviolence, peace, respect, understanding, inclusion, identity and engagement. In the middle we can see Gandhi’s figure, as we consider him an inspiration and a teacher, conformed by the image of the earth, formed by cubes, with one that’s missing, representing our commitment to contribute to the welfare of all creatures. Two humming birds are there as a symbol of peace. A hand with a corn, a river and a hand are also painted there showing Mexican identity. “SI 2017” stands for Satyagraha Institute 2017.

Being under the sun and doing graffiti was not easy, but it was fun, inspiring and powerful for participants and will certainly be for people who see it in the future.
Meditation Labyrinth

Rancho La Verdad is planned to be a space dedicated to peace and the following of Gandhi’s principles. As one of the activities of the Institute, the participants built a Meditation Labyrinth, with the structure of the one in Chartres Cathedral. The entrance of the labyrinth is close to the fence so visitants can freely come and walk in until they reach the center and walk out again. It took hours (under the sun, again!), a girl bitten by a scorpion, a discussion to figure out where the cardinal points were, lots of rides for water and fruit, laughter and lots of love to create this wonderful place for meditation, right in front of the trees plantation and the spots to see the sunrise and the sunset. (A couple of times we saw frogs coming and enjoying the experience of being in the labyrinth just as much as we did!) Morning prayers and evening meditation or conversations took place here, in harmony with nature, by wholehearted people.
Different Ages, Places and Contexts

All participants were so different from each other but one thing they had in common: their strong belief in peace, love and nonviolence. This was the most powerful bond for people to come along, become friends and open their hearts in such a manner that it will never be forgotten.
Icing on the Cake

Rancho La Verdad’s name is a really special thing for the Satyagrahi community. The word “verdad” means truth and this is also what Satya means in the word Satyagraha: a concept that was so important to Gandhi that he believed that Truth is God. As part of the closing ceremony, this place was appointed as the headquarters of Satyagraha Institute in Mexico. Coincidentally, this day was exactly the centennial anniversary of Satyagraha Ashram in India, one of the most important places in the history of the Gandhian movement as it is the spot from where the Salt Satyagraha started.
Participants

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