What is the relevance of Gandhian values in the world today? The aspect of Gandhian values that tend to receive most attention, not surprisingly, is the practice of non-violence.

Gandhiji’s championing of non-violence, even when facing a violent adversary, has stimulated public reflection and enkindled political action in different forms across the world. Not least of Gandhiji’s influences can be seen in the way courageous and visionary political leaders in many countries, including such luminaries as Martin Luther King in the United States and Nelson Mandela in South Africa, have been inspired by Gandhiji’s ideas and values. The violence that is endemic in the contemporary world makes the commitment to non-violence particularly challenging and difficult, but it also makes that priority especially important and urgent.

However, in this context it is extremely important to appreciate that non-violence is promoted not only by rejecting and spurning violent courses of action, but also by trying to build societies in which violence would not be cultivated and nurtured.

Gandhiji was concerned with the morality of personal behavior, but not just with that. We would undervalue the wide reach of his political thinking if we try to see non-violence simply as a code of behavior — important as such a code is.

Consider the general problem of terrorism in the world today. In fighting terrorism, the Gandhian response cannot be seen as taking primarily the form of pleading with the would-be terrorists to desist from doing dastardly things. Gandhiji’s ideas about preventing violence went far beyond that, involving social institutions and public priorities, as well as individual beliefs and commitments.

Some of the lessons of a Gandhian approach to violence and terrorism in the world are clear enough. Perhaps the simplest and one that has been much discussed

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recently is the importance of education in cultivating peace rather than discord. The implications include the need to discourage, and if possible to eliminate altogether, schools in which hatred of other communities, or other groups of people in general, is encouraged and nourished. This applies not only to militant madrassas, but also to other narrowly focused educational establishments in which a strong sense of sectarian identity is promoted, that distances one human being from another, on the basis of religion or ethnicity or caste or creed.

Bearing this in mind, and pursuing the general theme of the relevance of Gandhian values outside India, I ask the question: Is there something that America and Britain in particular can learn from Gandhiji’s political analysis?

It might be thought that Gandhiji’s lessons are widely understood in Britain and America, and at one level they certainly are. For example, militant preaching in mosques and madrassas have recently come under much scrutiny in Britain, especially after the carnage that London has experienced in the hands of home-grown terrorists. The British were shocked that young people from immigrant families born and brought up in Britain could be inclined to kill other people in Britain with such dedication. In response to this shock, many centers of hateful preaching and teaching are being restrained, or closed, in contemporary Britain, which is certainly an understandable move. But I argue that the full force of Gandhiji’s understanding of this subject has not yet been seized in British public policy.

One of the great messages of Gandhiji is that you cannot defeat nastiness, including violent nastiness, unless you yourself shun similar nastiness altogether. This has much immediate relevance today. For example, every atrocity committed in the cause of seeking useful information to defeat terrorism, whether in the Guantanamo detention center or in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, helps to generate more terrorism. The issue is not only that torture is always wrong, or that torture can hardly produce reliable information since the victims of torture say whatever would get them out of the ongoing misery. Both of these points are undoubtedly true. But beyond this, Gandhiji taught us that the loss of one’s own moral stature gives tremendous strength to one’s violent opponents.

The global embarrassment that the Anglo-American initiative has suffered from these systematic transgressions, and the way that bad behavior of those claiming to fight for democracy and human rights has been used by terrorists to get more recruits and some general public sympathy, might have surprised the military strategists sitting in Washington or London, but they are entirely in line with what Mahatma Gandhi was trying to teach the world. Time has not withered the force of Gandhiji’s arguments, nor their sweeping relevance to the world.

Gandhiji would have been appalled also by the fact that even though the United States itself, at least in principle, stands firmly against torture done on American soil
or by American personnel (indeed America has a remarkable history of codifying and asserting individual rights and liberties going back all the way to the amendments to the US constitution made already in the eighteenth century), there are many holders of high American positions who approve of, and actively support, the procedure of what is called “extraordinary rendition”. In that terrible procedure suspected terrorists are dispatched to countries that systematically perform torture, in order that questioning can be conducted there without the constraints that apply in America. The point that emerges from Gandhiji’s arguments is not only that this is a thoroughly unethical practice, but also that this is no way of winning a war against terrorism and nastiness. It is important to understand that Gandhiji not only presented to us a vision of morality, but also a political understanding of how one’s own behavior can be, depending on its nature, a source of great strength, or of tremendous weakness. Indeed, Gandhian values have to be seen and understood in terms of the Gandhian arguments that sustain those values. No matter how well-armed with weapons one might be, a loss of moral character saps one’s strength in a definitive way. The value of that lesson has never been greater than it is today.

Oddly enough, there is an uncanny similarity between the problems that Britain faces today and those that British India faced, and which Mahatma Gandhi thought were getting direct encouragement from the British Raj. I discuss this issue, among others, in a forthcoming book, called *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* to be published by W. W. Norton in March 2006.

Gandhiji was critical in particular of the official view that India was a collection of religious communities. When he came to London for the “Indian Round Table Conference” called by the British government in 1931, he found that he was assigned to a specific sectarian corner in the revealingly named “Federal Structure Committee.” Gandhiji resented the fact that he was being depicted primarily as a spokesman of Hindus, in particular “caste Hindus,” with the remaining 46 per cent of the population “being represented by chosen delegates (chosen by the British Prime minister) of each of the other communities.”

Gandhiji insisted that while he himself was a Hindu, Congress and the political movement that he led were staunchly secular and were not community-based; they had supporters from all the different religious groups in India. While he saw that a distinction can be made on religious lines between one Indian and another, he pointed to the fact that other ways of dividing the population of India were no less relevant. Gandhiji made a powerful plea for the British rulers to see the plurality of the diverse identities of Indians. In fact, he said he wanted to speak not for Hindus in particular, but for “the dumb, toiling, semi-starved millions” who constitute
“over 85 per cent of the population of India.”

Much has been written on the fact that India, with more than 145 million Muslim citizens, has produced extremely few home-grown terrorists acting in the name of Islam, and almost none linked with the Al Qaeda. There are many casual influences here. But some credit must also go to the nature of Indian democratic politics, and to the wide acceptance in India of the idea, championed by Mahatma Gandhi, that there are many identities other than religious ethnicity that are also relevant for a person’s self-understanding and for the relations between citizens of diverse background within the country.

The disastrous consequences of defining people by their religious ethnicity, and giving priority to the community-based perspective over all other identities, may well have come back to haunt the country of the rulers themselves. In the Round Table Conference of 1931, Gandhiji did not get his way, and even his dissenting opinions were only briefly recorded without mentioning the source of the dissent. In a gentle complaint addressed to the British Prime Minister, Gandhiji said at the meeting, “in most of these reports you will find that there is a dissenting opinion, and in most of the cases that dissent unfortunately happens to belong to me.”

Those statements certainly did belong only to him. But the wisdom behind Gandhiji’s far-sighted refusal to see a nation as a federation of religious and communities belongs, I must assert, to the entire world.