

## WHAT IS PERSON POWER?

**Michael:** In a way, person power is the core not only of what we call “principled nonviolence,” we think it’s the core of the shift to a new paradigm. Because the prevailing paradigm has as maybe its central misconception, the emptiness, the powerlessness of the individual. And the way that nonviolence really poses a counterpose, an antidote to that misconception is to say that, no, that’s quite mistaken. The greatest power lies within the individual. This is not to say that that power is already available to us. It usually isn’t accessible in most individuals.

But when it becomes accessible, it does incredible things. And of course, the example that comes most readily to our minds is Mahatma Gandhi, when he came back to India in 1916, he was one person. And he said, “I can liberate this country from the greatest empire the world has ever seen. And I can do it without firing a shot.” And at first people thought he was crazy, but guess what? Thirty years later, he delivered.

And he did that all by generating a power within himself which resonated very powerfully. First of all, with the immediate followers that were with him in his ashram. And then through that magnified individual, had this tremendous impact on the entire social field. The British rulers, the Indian themselves.

I know from personal experience and hearing it from my own spiritual teacher. He was growing up in India at that time and he was not political, so he didn’t quote “follow Gandhi” end quote. But he was so deeply moved by Gandhi’s actions and his example that when Gandhi when on a fast, Sri Easwaran found it difficult to eat. He would sit down, look at his food, and not be able to take his food because that, just in one little anecdote, I think, one little vignette, we get a sense of the tremendous power that is resident within us.

And in 1986, there was an uprising in the Philippines which was successful. It dislodged a deeply entrenched repressive military regime. And the term “people power” was coined to explain what the power was that had dislodged that regime. It was looked at from the outside, the power of a large number of aroused individuals. But looked at from the inside, it was the power within those individuals. And in fact, one of the cardinals who played a role in that revolution said, “Two million people went out in the street.” But you know what? It was a miracle because every individual said to himself, “I’m going to go out; I can do this thing,” said to herself, “This is something I’m ready to risk my life for.”

And so, we here at Metta coined the term, “person power,” to focus really on that power within the individual. Now sometimes when people hear, “person power,” they

think we mean, you know, like the tank man. There's one individual standing there blocking the whole army. Yeah, that can happen, but that's not exactly what we mean. More typically, person power enables an individual to make a tremendous sacrifice that galvanizes other people. So, they act as magnifiers for this energy.

Just as when we put a million men in the same uniforms and put them out in the field with weapons, we're magnifying the power of hatred, anger, and hostility when we galvanize the power within an individual, she or he can arouse other individuals to act with her or him. So, it's very dramatic when a single individual stands up against a whole system. And there are cases of that.

I can think of a similar example with my good friend, Daniel Ellsberg, who was in a position to reveal the falsehoods that were surrounding the Vietnam War, and was able to reveal that to the public. And it had a major impact on bringing that war to a halt. It wasn't sufficient unto itself to do that, but it had a big impact. It softened up the people. So, Dan did have to go through a remarkable individual transformation to mobilize that power.

And the way he described it to me was very interesting. He had been asking himself the question, "Gosh, if I release these documents, what will they do to me?" And he succeeded in paralyzing himself by asking that question. But one day, mostly under the influence of his wife, Patricia, I believe, he found himself asking an entirely different question. He said, "If I'm willing to go to jail, what does that allow me now to do?" And immediately, it became clear to him, "I am willing to go to jail for this and that means that I can release these papers to the American public who deserves them."

And the end result, actually, in the event, Dan did not go to jail—which I'm not sure a whistleblower would have that kind of immunity today. But it is as good illustration of what a well-placed individual can do. But real person power means when we overcome fear and anger and greed within ourselves, we create our own position. We can find a way into a situation so that the power that we have discovered and mobilized within ourselves can have its impact on the situation.