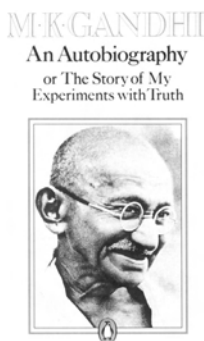


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## Understanding Gandhi's *Ahimsa* (Non-violence)

Reflections on *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*



Was Gandhi a personification of Indian traditions to whom non-violence came natural and was inevitable? On this, one must rely on Gandhi's own candid evaluations of himself. His Autobiography provides one such authentic source.

Mohandas Gandhi, also known as Mahatma Gandhi, believed that there was no other God than Truth, and that the only means for realization of Truth was *Ahimsa* (p.453). Truth to Gandhi was synonymous with God. What he strove to achieve through *Ahimsa* was ultimately to seek *Moksha* (spiritual libera-

GANDHI, Mohandás Karamchand (2001). *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. London: Penguin Books, 464 pp. ISBN 9780-141-18686-3. First published in Gujrati and English by the Navjivan Publishing House in 1927 and 1929 (2 vols.; reissued as 1 vol. in 1983). Sem tradução galega disponível.

tion). His *Autobiography* alternately entitled, *The Story of My experiments with Truth*, is about his persistent search about whether such quest steeped in Dharma, right action, is feasible. In Hindu, Buddhist and Jain scriptures, *Ahimsa* refers to non-injury in thoughts, words and deed.

In 1927, when the *Autobiography* was published, Gandhi was 58 years old. There were still many non-violent struggles to be fought e.g. Hindu-Muslim unity, abolition of caste based untouchability, advocacy of home-spun *Swadeshi* clothing, and above all gaining In-

dia's independence from the British rule. His *Autobiography* provides insights into shaping of his core beliefs on which his non-violent instrument of political action, *Satyagraha*, the Truth-force, was later founded. On his concept of *Ahimsa*, Gandhi writes:

*Ahimsa* is a comprehensive principle. We are helpless mortals caught in the flagration of *himsa*. The saying that life lives on life has a deep meaning in it. Man cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward *himsa*. The very fact of his living -eating, drinking and moving about- necessarily involves some *himsa*, destruction of life, be it ever so minute. A votary of *ahimsa* therefore remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of *himsa*." (p.319) Such an individual will then constantly grow in self-restraint and love for others.

#### *Aparigraha* and *Samabhava*

To understand *Ahimsa*, Gandhi relies on the teachings of the Hindu epic, the *Bhagavad Gita*, his "infallible guide of conduct", especially its two principles of *Aparigraha* (non-possession) and *Samabhava* (equability). (pp.244-246).

Words like *aparigraha* (non-possession) and *sambhava* (equability) grip-

ped me. How to cultivate and preserve that equability was the question. How was one to treat alike insulting, insolent and corrupt officials, co-workers of yesterday raising meaningless opposition, and men who have always been good to one? How was the one to divest oneself of all possessions? Was not the body itself possession enough? Were not wife and children possessions? Was I to destroy all the cupboards of books I had...

Raising such honest doubts, he asks: "Was I to give up all I had and follow Him? Straight came the answer: I could not follow Him unless I gave up all I had."

Drawing upon his familiarity as a barrister with the maxims of equity in English jurisprudence, Gandhi's interpretation of *aparigraha* is that of a "trustee" in the service of the poor and the disadvantaged:

I understood the *Gita* teaching of non-possession to mean that those who desired salvation should act like the trustee who, though having control over great possessions, regards not an iota of them as his own. It became clear to me as daylight that non-possession and equability presupposed a change of heart, a change of attitude (p.245).

It is this 'change of heart' aspect of *Ahimsa* is central to Gandhi. How to bring in such a change within oneself?

Renouncing his material possessions, Gandhi takes a number of steps. To begin with, he lets his life

insurance policy lapse. With regards to his wife and children, he is convinced that God who created them and him, would take care of them (p.245). Next, he sends his life's savings to his elder brother who had brought him up as a son, informing that henceforth he should not expect anything from him, as all his future savings would be utilized for the benefit of the larger community, who he now regarded as his family. He finds it a terrible responsibility to be a parent, and subjects love for his children also to the test of these two principles.

It is never children's fault. 'Who can say thus far, no further, to the tide of his own nature?' Who can raise the impressions with which he is born? It is idle to expect one's children and wards necessarily to follow the same course of evolution as oneself (p.246).

#### *Purity of Heart*

To Gandhi, "change of heart", a life long goal, is of utmost importance. It can be achieved through subduing senses and carrying out selfless service. "To attain perfect purity one has to become absolutely passion-free in thought, speech, and deed; to rise above the opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion" (p.453). Without self-purification, he feels that observance of *Ahimsa* will be an empty dream. Purification of mind can lead to the purification of one's

surroundings, and eventually extend its impact to broader society.

At the same time, Gandhi is realistic to concede that the path of self-purification is not an easy one. He admits: "I know that I have not in me as yet that triple purity, in spite of constant ceaseless striving for it. That is why the world's praise fails to move me, indeed it very often stings me. To conquer the subtle passions seems to me to be harder far than the physical conquest of the world by the force of arms" (p.453). Ultimately, *Ahimsa* is the farthest limit of humility for which a man of his own free has to put himself last among his fellow creatures (p.454).

#### *Hate the Sin, not the Sinner*

For practicing *Ahimsa*, Gandhi provides another helpful suggestion, distinguish between the actor and his actions. Hate the sin and not the sinner. Gandhi finds that one's inability to make such distinction "leads to the poison of hatred spread in the world" (p.254). He knows it is a precept easy to understand, but difficult to practice. In Gandhi's words:

Man and his deed are two distinct things. Whereas a good deed should call forth approbation and a wicked deed disapprobation, the doer of the deed, whether good or wicked, always deserves respect or pity as the case may be" (p.254).

The last part of his statement appealing for respect and empathy for the doer of the deed, whether good, bad, or ugly underlines his compassion which is in many ways similar to the antidote of 'loving kindness' as applied for subduing personal hatred in Buddhism. He takes on the challenge of equability in reaching out to his opponents in India and South Africa.

Gandhi elaborates: "The *ahimsa* is the basis of the search for truth. I am realizing every day that the search is in vain unless it is founded on *ahimsa* as the basis. It is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author tantamount to resisting and attacking one self. For we are all tarred with the same brush, and are children of the Creator, and as such the divine powers within us are infinite. To slight a single human being is to slight those divine powers, and thus to harm not only that being but with him the whole world" (p. 254).

#### *The Truth Principle*

Gandhi throughout his life remained a seeker of Truth. Since his childhood, he had a strong conviction that morality is the basis of things, and that truth is the substance of all morality. For him, truth is the sovereign principle for executing his morality. His definition of truth keeps on expanding, bring-

ing in numerous other principles within its fold.

This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only relative truth in our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God. There are innumerable definitions of God, because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth only I have not found Him, but I am seeking after Him... But as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and buckler (p.15).

Gandhi's Truth is the search for Universal Absolute. Such definition of God has in it a belief about spiritual unity that Divine permeates everything in this universe. God's names and forms may vary, but same divinity is in all. The oneness towards all creeds in all lands comes natural to Gandhi. His spiritual quest for the Universal Absolute in this sense comes close to the Vedantic notion of *Brahman* which points that everything in the universe originates from *Brahman* (Absolute), exists in *Brahman* and unfolds through it, and ultimately dissolves in *Brahman*.

#### *Books and Mentors*

In addition to the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi mentions a long list of books and mentors in his *Autobiography*, starting with Leo Tolstoy by his book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*; and John Ruskin by his *Unto This Last*, and Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*. There are common strands running through these works of an alternative vision of a society, grounded in compassion and non-killing, challenging the prevalent institutions in their respective societies of slavery, serfdom, colonization and industrialism. Gandhi's two ashrams in South Africa -Phoenix (1904) and Tolstoy Farm (1910) were inspired from these works.

Tolstoy's *Kingdom of God is Within You*, makes an abiding impression on him. He is moved by Tolstoy's description of the Sermon on the Mount. Mathew's gospel is all about a spiritual quest, a divine search in which the seeker dispossesses himself of all of his worldly possessions in order to gain that one pearl of great value, God.

The notion of trusteeship is seeded into Gandhi's mind from Ruskin. The latter's strong revulsion against human exploitation caused by industrialism, brings about in him, an "instantaneous and practical transformation" (p.274). He is so impressed with Ruskin's book that he translates it later into his mother tongue Gujarati, entitling it *Sarvodaya* (the welfare for

all). Sarvodaya will eventually form the basis of Gandhi's vision of his alternative nonkilling society, and will serve as a catalyst for his decision to enter into active politics.

Gandhi is captivated by Ruskin's ethics of dignity of labour and the necessity of bread labour (p.274-275). He summarizes the teachings of *Unto This Last* as follows:

1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all.
2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's; in as much as all the same right of earning their livelihood from their work.
3. That a life of labour, i.e. the life of the tiller of soil and handicraftsman, is the life worth living (pp. 274-75).

Gandhi felt that first of these conclusions he knew. The second he had dimly realized. The third had never occurred to him. The book made it clear to him that the second and the third were contained in the first -that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all.

Gandhi has many other mentors. On spirituality, Raichand Jain whose advice on *Bhagavad Gita* and *Vaishnavism* he frequently sought. On secular matters, he thought highly of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian nationalist leaders like Lokmanya Ghandhar Tilak, Sir Pherozshah, Dadabhai Naraoji, and Gopal Krishin Gokhale. He met them on return visits from South Africa.

*Ahimsa and Political Action*

Gratitude and non-hatred for his opponents are two hallmarks of Gandhi's *Ahimsa*. He is unable to hate anyone, even his ultimate adversary, the British Empire. He is a strong champion of its judiciary and other institutions. To show his goodwill to the Empire, he goes as far as to involve himself in the recruitment campaigns for the British during the First War. This brings him criticism from others. He persists as he had done the same in South Africa during the Boer War thereby gaining respect of ruling leadership for the social and political reforms for Indian working class émigrés. It is in the ambulance corps he finds a niche where he and his fellow workers could volunteer in the war effort.

The desire for service arises in Gandhi from a deep sense of public duty and a belief that one must be loyal to the State one lives in. Eventually, this notion of loyalty and self-discipline becomes a focal point of training volunteers for his civil disobedience movement of *Satyagraha* (Truth Force). To be considered eligible for his call of civil disobedience, his peace volunteers must render "a willing and respectful obedience" to the State laws. Gandhi clarifies that this is not just an ordinary compliance to a law, but "the willing and spontaneous obedience" required of a true *Satyagrahi*.

For *Satyagraha* action Gandhi carefully chooses his causes, initiated often in places by him where the flagrant abuse and exploitation is obvious and known. In addition to truthful moral ground for protest, like a diligent lawyer he goes a step further in examining and analyzing the situation from both the sides. And when convinced that morally the political action is justifiable, he approaches his adversary on the imminent need for change. Only failing those approaches, he takes the recourse of *Satyagraha*.

*Satyagraha: The Truth Force*

Insisting a high moral character, Gandhi demands of his co-workers that they be civil, non-conspiring, and under no circumstance counter violence with violence. He believes if the cause being fought is just and truthful, the method of truth-force would bring in a change of heart in his opponents. In this, his open and non-secretive deliberations are always aimed at engaging his adversary in a dialogue.

Forgiveness is an essential component of Gandhi's Truth Force. Without much philosophizing, Gandhi writes about a simple act of sublime forgiveness he learnt from his father. As a lad of fifteen, his innocent confession, written as a letter apologizing for his pilfering money from his ailing father's wallet, brings tears to the father's eyes.

Both father and son are unable to resist crying at the young Gandhi's act of repentance.

Gandhi writes: "A clean confession combined with a promise never to commit the sin again, when offered before one who has the right to receive it, is the purest type of repentance. When such *Ahimsa* becomes self-embracing, it transforms everything it touches. There is no limit to its power" (p.41). This father-son episode to him is more than just an expression of a father's love, for him it is pure *Ahimsa*.

The gap between ideals and practice of *Ahimsa* at political level came as shock to him when during the civil disobedience movement in the Kheda District in Gujarat, he noticed the lacking discipline among his volunteers. Before any massive deployment of nonviolent civil disobedience workers in a political action, he feels that it would be imperative "to create a band of well-tryed, pure hearted volunteers who thoroughly understood the strict conditions of *Satyagraha*" (p.423).

He is disappointed at his co-worker's shallow understanding of *Satyagraha* (Truth Force), and accepts that a long-term serious effort will be necessary to develop a large trained cadre of civil disobedience workers, his *Shanti Sainiks*, the members of his nonviolent peace brigade. A *Satyagrahi* devoid of hatred for his opponent can compel

the later in the spirit of love and personal suffering, gaining thereby a higher moral ground over the opponent psychologically. A scrupulous and conscientious observance of this rule is essential for those wanting to join the ranks of *Satyagrahis*.

Whether in private or in public, Gandhi holds that one should consider always the faults of others, however big, to be insignificant and negligible; while one's own, however insignificant and small, to be big and feel repentant. It is then one is able to arrive at the relative estimate of the two. It is only when one sees one's own mistakes in this light, there are possibilities of one's genuine transformation. Once Gandhi realizes that he has made a mistake, he does not rest till he has confessed to it, even though such confession may bring upon him a lot of ridicule and embarrassment. He has a full section in his *Autobiography* on the subject of failure in Kheda campaign under the title "A Himalayan Miscalculation" (pp.423-424).

#### *Ahimsa and Gandhi*

One of the original contributions of Gandhi is to bring together the non-violence tenets in Buddhism and Jainism with Truth, the *Advaitic* non-dualist notion of oneness of reality as in the Upanishads. For Gandhi, God and Truth are interchangeable terms. God is Truth, but Truth is God too. Truth

is not something that can be realized by mere meditation and reading books, for Gandhi it is experiential, requiring a heart-felt practice of *Ahimsa* in thought, words, and deed. Ultimately, end and means to him must merge into one.

While doing this, Gandhi places himself without fear amidst the weak and the poor and stands with them like one of their own as their companion in suffering. Spirit of sacrifice to him is supreme as it originates from pure heart and conscience. Hence, work done in that spirit Gandhi finds in accordance with his *Atma Dharma*, a call of conscience, as described in the *Bhagavad Gita*. It comes very close to Gandhi's Truth Force.

Key ingredients of Gandhi's *Ahimsa* can be summarized as: a belief in unity of life and brotherhood of Man; non-injury in thought, word, and deed; sense of sacrifice based on the values of equability and detachment; trusteeship in public service; love of one's opponent; compassion and forgiveness, voluntary respect for State laws; and penchant for openness and dialogue.

For Gandhi, *Ahimsa* is a work in progress. It is a fundamental tool for one's continual search of Truth that can bring change at individual and societal levels. Gandhi is able to use it effectively for societal reforms in South Africa and India,

and later as an instrument for political change, the Independence movement in colonial India. He uses it with great conviction and thought against a democratic institutional framework prided by the British. He has a strong belief that there are non-killing solutions to resolve problems whether these be social or political.

Beauty of Gandhi is that he practices what he preaches. A few months before his assassination in 1947, Gandhi remarked that his life has been his message. In his *Autobiography*, he reveals himself with all his warts in hope that his "experiments with Truth" will encourage others in actualization of their self. He lives by his example practicing non-attachment and equability with compassion and humility, and encourages others to do so. He shows that the precept of *Ahimsa* is not only for the extraordinary, but everyone.

*Ahimsa* to Gandhi is not a refuge for cowardice. He has no place for cowards in his Truth Force. To him, *Ahimsa* is in fact the only way to merge into the Absolute, without fear uttering God's name unto one's last breath. It's a perfect *Mokhsa* that every Hindu aspires towards as part of his faith, but only a few are able to accomplish that. Gandhi's last words on being hit by the three bullets of his assas-



sin were: "Hey Ram". O God! it tantamount to forgiveness of his killer.

Gandhi's life shows that practicing nonviolence requires an earnest desire to adhere to such other human values as truth, righteousness, justice, love, and peace. His life confirms that faith based non-violent approach can bring in genuine personal and political transformation and strengthen one's confidence in Self to reach out to others as equals without proselytizing and coercion. These Gandhian characteristics have been now widely tested over a century, and continue to inspire others interested in a non-violent social and political action across the globe.

Gandhi's life also raises the question of how much value the contributions of profoundly inspired persons should, either secular or spiritual, be factored into in the training and development of *Ahimsa* practitioners? Gandhi's life in particular points in that direction, that is, in order to employ nonviolent methods such a person must have the highest moral order so as to embody non-violence within. He has to be morally credible to such a degree that his presence itself should become conducive to transform a climate of violence into that where his presence may generate respect and tolerance among disputing parties, which may subsequently lead to reconciliation and amity.

Though Gandhi saw himself as a devout Hindu, his concept of Hinduism varied from the orthodoxy of the prevalent times. He was not afraid to admit or challenge its shortcomings, giving these orthodoxies a vital reinterpretation. He looked within his faith the values that connected with Hindus, Hindus with other Hindus and peoples of other faiths. He followed the religious precepts and interpretations that united cultures and people instead of dividing them.

In attempt to highlight Gandhi's unique contribution in discovering "nonviolent political action", Gandhi's persistent spiritual quest has been played down by his greatest western admirers, treating spirituality and character development as secondary and politically inconsequential<sup>1</sup>. The *Bhagavad Gita* that Gandhi revered is not just a story of physical warfare and justification of fighting, but it is about spiritual struggle between those engaged in Dharma (right action) and Adharma (not right action). It is a dialogue of learning between a

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<sup>1</sup> Political scientist Gene Sharp's classic works, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* and *Gandhi as a Political Strategist* based on the analysis of Gandhi's life and teachings not only refute the popular assumption that power is derived from violence and can be controlled by greater violence, but these also describe the methods and dynamics of nonviolent action.

seeker of the highest moral character Arjuna and Lord Krishna, the provider of supreme divine knowledge. The Gita is not about war, but how to achieve the peace within when the battles are waging both in and out. It is therefore also called, "The Song of Divine Love". However to say that these elements from scriptures were conducive to Gandhi's approach, and that Gandhi drew upon these largely to win Indian masses will be an oversimplification<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, to describe Gandhi's Satyagraha concept a rather philosophical term close to "essence of being" will be to miss its creative origins that drove Gandhi in his search for Truth as defined in ancient Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita<sup>3</sup>. His constant use of religious

terminology and theological language in explanation or justification of a social or political act was to enhance his own understanding of ancient scriptures as well as to share his unique socially relevant insights with the masses.

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<sup>2</sup> Sharp, Gene (1979). *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*. Boston: Porter Sargent, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Sharp, Gene, *Ibid.*, p. 14. On unique contribution of Gandhi, Sharp points out that while religious groups as the early Quakers, had practiced non-violent action as a reaction to persecution, the link between the moral qualities of nonviolence and the technique of action in social and political struggles was rarely made, except by individuals such as Tolstoy, and even then remained on the level of ideas... It remained of Gandhi to make the most significant political experiments to that time in the use of non-cooperation, disobedience and defiance to control rulers, alter policies, and undermine poli-

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tical systems. With Gandhi's experiments with the technique, its character was broadened and refinements made."