

Gandhi's Philosophical Insights based on Virtues of Life

Rev. Dr.A.IRUDAYARAJ

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy
Arul Anandar(Autonomous) College, Karumathur, Madurai

Gandhi's conception of virtues of life in human beings' day today living is very much significant. Gandhi as the father of nation, mass mobilizer in freedom struggle, champion of swaraj, swadeshi and spiritual leader was the champion of integrity. For Him, Integrity and goodness are the epicenter of good human life. He has his own moral convictions and practice of virtues that flow from his Religious faith and politics. According to Gandhi, Religion can't be separated from politics. Hinduism is dearer to him like his mother. He became the man of integrity by following the moral ideals. For him, good life is based on practice of virtues. There are seven key concepts and philosophical insights that are derived from his life and writings (i) Yama and Niyama (ii) Truth (iii) Non-violence (iv) Goodness (v) Kinship (vi) Gift of fearlessness (vii) Tapas

(I) The Concept Of Yama And Niyama

Yama and Niyama are the ethical precepts set forth in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras as the first and second of the eight limbs of yoga. They are the foundation of our practice without which no spiritual progress along the path of yoga can be made.¹ For Gandhi, Yama means self-restraints of thoughts, words and actions. They are (1) Ahimsa (Non-Harming) (2) Satya (Truthfulness) (3) Asetya (Non-Stealing) (4) Bramacharya (Right use of energy) (5) Aparigraha (Non-greed).

The five yamas ask practitioners to avoid violence, lying, stealing, wasting energy, and possessiveness, while the five niyamas ask us to embrace cleanliness and contentment, to purify ourselves through heat, to continually study and observe our habits, and to surrender to something greater than ourselves. In Indian traditions, particularly Yoga, niyamas and its complement, Yamas, are recommended activities and habits for healthy living,

spiritual enlightenment and liberated state of existence. It has multiple meanings depending on context in Hinduism.²

For Gandhi Niyama means the vows that are to be followed. (1) self-purification (2) Self-contentment (3) self-Discipline (4) Self-Study (5) Self-Surrender. Following of all these vows will lead towards the disposition of character by which one is able to live an integrated life and able to see others clearly. A satyagrahi needs to cultivate virtues by taking vows. The problematic of every human person is that he looks from egoistic view point who are For and Against us. Gandhi propose the method of Non-violence (Ahimsa) even to befriend the enemy.

(II) From the Concept of God is Truth Towards Truth is God

Gandhi's religion was spiritual humanism because he declared that the service of the poor whom he called 'Daridranarayana' is a true service of God. In other words, Gandhi found God amidst his creation; this creation is confined not only to India, his own land and not Hinduism alone, the religion to which he belonged.

To me God is Truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheist of the atheist. For in His boundless love God permits the atheist to live. He is the searcher of hearts. He transcends speech and reason. He knows us and our hearts better than we do ourselves. He does not take us at our word, for He knows that we often do not mean it, some knowingly and others unknowingly.³

I then found that the nearest approach to Truth was through love. But I also found that love has many

¹<https://www.google.com/> the concept of Yama and niyama, Retrieved on 12th February, 2017

²Deborah Adele, The Yamas Niyamas: Exploring Yoga's Ethical Practice, On-Word Bound Books, 2009, pp.9-10

³<https://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap10.htm>, retrieved on 13th February, 2017

meanings in the English language at least and that human love in the sense of passion could become a degrading thing also. I found too that love in the sense of ahimsa had only a limited number of votaries in the world. But I never found a double meaning in connection with truth and not even atheists had demurred to the necessity or power of truth. But, in their passion for discovering truth, the atheists have not hesitated to deny the very existence of God-from their own point of view, rightly. And it was because of this reasoning that I saw that, rather than say that God is Truth, I should say that Truth is God.⁴

God is Truth, but God is many other things also. That is why I say Truth is God. Only remember that Truth is not one of the many qualities that we name. It is the living embodiment of God, it is the only Life, and I identify Truth with the fullest life, and that is how it becomes a concrete thing, for God is His whole creation, the whole Existence, and service of all that exists-Truth-is service of God.⁵ Gandhi concepts of God flows from his staunch belief in Hinduism. He says that God is Truth, this understanding brings lots of divisions among people of various religions because many religions, many Gods and many truths.⁶ Therefore, he makes a shift from God is truth towards Truth is God. The concept of truth brings the various people together to live in unity. He says that there is divinity in every human person and everyone needs to recognize the same in every human person. All are equal in the sight of God. There is sameness of attitude in everyone. Every human being needs to have right orientation towards truth for which one needs to free from all kinds of self-deceptions through desires.

(III) The Concept of Non-Violence

Gandhi took the religious principle of ahimsa (doing no harm) common to Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism and turned it into a non-violent tool for mass action. He used it to fight not only colonial rule but social evils such as racial discrimination and untouchability as well. The Gandhian strategy is the combination of truth, sacrifice, non-violence, selfless service and cooperation. According

⁴*Ibid*

⁵*Ibid*

⁶Gandhi M.K., Truth is God, compiled by Prabu, Navajivan Trust, 1995, p.31-38

to Gandhi one should be brave and not a coward. He should present his views, suggestions and thoughts without being violent. One should fight a war with the weapons of truth and non-violence.⁷

The concept of Non-violence is connected with Non-stealing and Non-possession. Practice of non-stealing indicates that not to take away things from others, even with their permission which is not needed for that person. Non-possession is also equated with Non-acquisitiveness which means giving-up attachment even the things one has. It is not freedom from possession but freedom from acquisitiveness that is absence of possessiveness. Gandhi advises even to give-up the possession of the body.

People power is the sustained, strategic application of a variety of nonviolent tactics, including civil disobedience, boycotts, strikes and non-cooperation. Nonviolence is the personal practice of being harmless to self and others under every condition. It comes from the belief that hurting people, animals or the environment is unnecessary to achieve an outcome and refers to a general philosophy of abstention from violence.⁸

(IV) The Concept Of Goodness

The concept of goodness is connected with the reality. Good means a lack of self-centredness. It means the ability to empathise with other people, to feel compassion for them, and to put their needs before your own. It means, if necessary, sacrificing your own well-being for the sake of others.⁹ For Gandhi, when we approach things with love, we are able to see the truth and the reality and we meet the otherness in the other. According to Him, truth and non-violence is inseparable because by following non-violence, one is able to find out the truth of the other. This is a continuous service to the other to find out the truth.

(V) The Concept of Kinship

Kinship. refers to the culturally defined relationships between individuals who are commonly thought of as

⁷<https://www.google.com/> the concept of non-violence/ retrieved on 13thFebruary, 2017

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹<https://www.google.com/> the concept of Goodness/ retrieved on 14thFebruary, 2017

having family ties. All societies use kinship as a basis for forming social groups and for classifying people. Traditionally, a family can be defined as a group of individuals who are related through common ancestry, marriage, or adoption. Similarly, some cultures value kinship on both sides of a family tree, while others only value kinship from one side. Kinship decides who can marry with whom and where marital relationships are taboo. It determines the rights and obligations of the members in all the sacraments and religious practices from birth to death in family life.¹⁰

Gandhi says that treat every human person as one's own kith and kin, because in kinship, there is humility, forgiveness and love. When one treats the other as kith and kin, then there is a greater possibility of loving those who differ from us. We love those who hate us. These non-violent methods transform the giver and the receiver. This flows from compassion which is the heart of religion.

(VI) The Concept of Gift of Fearlessness

Fearlessness is a traditional concept in Asian cultures – so much so that there is a Sanskrit word for it (*ABHAYA*), a mudra (image top) and teachings on it in all major eastern spiritual traditions. Traditionally, this is a gift given by rulers, leaders and others in power to their subjects of assurances not only of protection, but of using their powers only as protection and not being harmful to their subjects. This is traditionally a gift given by those such as the samurai, who promise to use their powers only to protect the weak from the strong. While most of us are not in great positions of power, we can still examine how we use the small positions of power and whether we give a strong gift of fearlessness with these positions. We also, even when not in a position of power, can give fearlessness to others by supporting places of shelter and benefit.¹¹

We can also give this gift by not appearing frightening, but by behaving in moral, ethical and generous ways. We can protect those we can (such as by watching the door and clock during meditation for our friends). We can be

¹⁰<https://www.google.com/kinship/> retrieved on 16th February, 2017.

¹¹<https://redclaysangha.org/> retrieved on 17th February, 2017

dependable and not make our friends and family fear for our safety. The concept of giving fearlessness to others can be expanded, I think, far beyond these traditional protections from ogres into many categories. This gift of fearlessness is even something we can give when we do not have it this self. One place to look is at the many ways we can become this fearlessness and give it to others.¹²

Gandhi says about the Gift of fearlessness to all human beings and even in facing the enemy, there shall be no fear. A satyagrahi will face the enemy with courage. Gift of fearlessness leaves hostility. He follows forgiveness and forgets the evil deeds done by the evil doer. According to Gandhi cowards can never forgive but only courageous people alone can forgive, one of the best qualities of the satyagrahi is this act of forgiving. There is an invitation to live out the Ahimsa.

(VII) The Concept of TAPAS

The meaning of the word Tapas evolves in ancient Indian literature which means warmth, heat, fire. The earliest understanding of *tapas*, and compound words from the root *tap* relate to the heat necessary for biological birth. Its conceptual origin is traced to the natural wait, motherly warmth and physical brooding provided by birds such as a hen upon her eggs - a process that is essential to hatching and birth; the Vedic scholars used mother nature's example to explain and extend this concept to hatching of knowledge and spiritual rebirth. Gandhi instructs the satyagrahi to follow Tapas which will lead to (i) suffer for the sake of truth (ii) training oneself in non-violence (iii) penance to cultivate values and virtues in life and in a special way, following of tapas will lead to get rid of one's own anger. Following all these values and virtues would lead one to obtain good human life.

Critique on Gandhi's Ideologies and Praxis

The Following questions could be raised for further explorations (i) if anyone follows the non-violent method of Gandhi, does he not hurt Himself? Is he not doing violence to himself? (ii) will Gandhi's non-violent method do any good to the marginalized minorities of India? will it not perpetuate inequality in the society? (iv) will it not allow the

¹²*Ibid*

powerful to be powerful and the powerless to be more powerless? (v) Can the fundamental rights of the downtrodden be obtained through non-violent struggle?

There are at least two critical remarks levelled against Gandhi. (i) By signing of Poona pact in 1932, Gandhi used a right means of non-violent fasting unto death to achieve a wrong end that resulted in millions and millions of Dalits rights and privileges are lost at all levels. He has gone against his own philosophy of End never justifies means. (ii) When He was thrown-out from the train in south Africa, he fought only for the rights of Indians. He never raised the voice in favour of black negros who were marginalized of south Africa, rather he even made certain humiliating remarks against blacks of South Africa as a reconsult the statue of Gandhi which was erected in the campus of

Ghana University was pulled down by the university students in 2018. Therefore, a basic question arises, Gandhi who is famously known as mahatma, is he eligible enough to be called as mahatma? If at all, we accept this view, for whom he is mahatma is the bone of contention. However, his method of non-violent struggle towards India's Independence is highly appreciated in the world.

To conclude with the words of John Henry Neuman, 'Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom, lead thou me on; The night is dark, and I am far from home, Lead thou me on. Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me.' If everyone takes a step and looks towards to live a non-violent life and people will find transformation and will be able to live a life of integrity.