

## GANDHI ON SARVODAYA (UNIVERSAL WELFARE)

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*Meditate on the millions of the dispossessed.*  
– Mahatma Gandhi

**Preamble:** Today's offering or thought piece is drawn from the seminal writings of Mahatma Gandhi, especially those selections of Gandhi's letters found in Professor Raghavan Iyer's *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*. In addition to Gandhi's own wealth of ideas and perceptions, I am deeply indebted to Professor Iyer's "Introduction" to the volume which is profound, provocative and inspirational.

Out of the oceanic heart of Gandhi a tear drop falls, and it crystallizes into a seven word mantram that is at once a cry, an inspiration and a command. That mantramic invocation is: "Meditate on the millions of the dispossessed." Daily meditation on the millions of disenfranchised human beings is the spiritual pole star of *Sarvodaya* or 'universal welfare'. It is our gateway to understanding *Sarvodaya*, it is our inspiration for pursuing it and it is the compass by which we can true ourselves when we are bewildered by a morally tumultuous world.

Let us begin our inquiry into ‘universal welfare’ by delving into the deep but refreshing waters of Gandhian thought to discover the fundamental basis of his dedication to *Sarvodaya*, to uplifting the poor and destitute while reforming and humanizing the appropriators and the complacent. The essence of Gandhi’s over-all metaphysical and ethical views can be gleaned from the following statement by Gandhi in 1936: (see *Socialism of My Conception*, pgs 140 and 141).

*Man’s ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities, social, political, religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavour, simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service of all. And this cannot be done except through one’s country.*

Mystically speaking, since God, the Self and Humanity are One, the purest wish by the most enlightened individual for Universal Good would be instantaneously infinite and immediately felt by all living beings. However, the vast majority of us function well below the level of such an exalted perspective and such pristine motivation. Therefore, we, the unenlightened, must consciously assume the posture of seekers after Truth committed to heroic, non-violent action in a very limited and imperfect world. I say ‘imperfect world’ advisedly, because Gandhi was not simply an idealist who serenely ignored evil in order to defeat it. Human wickedness, rooted in selfishness and competitiveness, cannot be overcome by benign neglect. Gandhi was an objective idealist. He refused to relinquish ideals and he was equally fearless in facing the facts of the human condition. Like a man engaged in walking, Gandhi’s eyes were focused on the horizon, but with a keen awareness of where he was placing his feet.

How then did Gandhi see the world in which he lived and in which we continue to live in the Twenty First Century? We live in a world in which there is much poverty, exploitation, selfishness, violence, and most especially, greed ñ and this is so whether we define these in spiritual or material terms. We live in a world in which neither communism, capitalism, socialism, anarchism or the welfare state have presented any morally viable solutions for the world’s dispossessed. We live in a world in which mass politics, mass production and mass conversion have been the enemies of the

social good, not their benefactor. Sadly to Gandhi, we also live in a world in which religion, in its narrow sectarian and institutional meaning, is doing much to warp the deeper and more powerful-feeling nature of man. Institutional religion seems to be adroit at insulating as well as isolating man from man. Paradoxically, the more this occurs the more man is unwittingly separated from God. Instead of living up to the dignity and promise of its etymological meaning of 'binding back to' or 'unifying', religion is dividing and separating mankind ñ in India as well as elsewhere.

At the same time, while all this is true at one level, Gandhi firmly believed that there is a 'spiritual current for good' that continually circumnavigates the globe and uses, in a Shelleyian sense, all those noble pioneers who consecrate themselves to its service. (See Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*) Gandhi, ever the optimist, felt that there are always great possibilities for the truly courageous. Like the great American visionary, Tom Paine, Gandhi felt that it is always true that "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." While there is never a moment when we cannot do *some* good, there are critical convergences in history where immeasurable good can be done for present and future generations. This can only come about through conscious commitment and creative suffering. Thus, to Gandhi, *Dharmakshetra* (the realm of duty) is in fact, also the realm of battle, *Kurukshetra*, the realm in which the forces of good and evil, of selfishness and altruism, are eternally in a death struggle. Only selfless action for the good of all could and would align the individual with the deeper currents of the Spirit percolating in the receptive hearts of individuals.

To Gandhi, each of us must answer the call made by all the great spiritual teachers of humanity and all the greater founders of true civilization – that is, we must consciously foster our own aspirations to find God or Truth and take fresh initiatives to serve the good of all creatures.

To Gandhi, the more profound our grasp of Truth and the greater our practice of non-violence (non-exploitation), the more we will increasingly perceive the essence of 'universal welfare' and release the therapeutic elixir that heals the many without being at the expense of the few. The dialectic of Truth and non-violent action is continually fused by *tappas*, the willingness to suffer for the sake of the good of all, the willingness to marry the global in the local, the needs of society within the unfolding aspirations of the individual.

What is Gandhi's basis for claiming that any individual can choose 'universal welfare' or *Sarvodaya* in specific, local contexts – especially since we live in times that are, in Dickens' often quoted phrase, "the best of times and the worst of times"? To understand how it is possible for us to imaginatively transmute the divisive forces which confront every man and woman in the Age of *Kali Yuga* (the iron age), we must understand two points in Gandhian thought – his concept of Man and his conception of the Moral Law.

What is Man? To Gandhi, man is primarily a spiritual and moral being blessed with the divine but limited gift of reason or thought. The spiritual aspect of man seeks union with God and is the basis of all great cultures and of all human achievement. The moral aspect of man, that which chooses in a world of necessary action and encounter, is that dimension of the self which courageously seeks to will the good of others despite the plethora of passions and distractions that plague us at every stage of life. The rational aspect in man is the turning point. Thought can contemplate the infinities of God or Truth and it can think out the meaning, implications and creative applications of universal values such as Justice, Right and Good in specific contexts.

From this standpoint, Gandhi would have agreed with Mohammed's distinction between angels, men and animals. Angels have intellect, but no sensual nature. Animals have a sensual nature but no intellect. Man has both an intellect and a sensual nature. He is less than an animal when he subordinates his intelligence to his sensual nature, but greater than the angels when he subordinates his animal passions to his reason.

The primary agent of 'universal welfare' or 'universal uplift' then is the self-consciously committed individual. He or she is the key and the keystone to all considerations of spiritual, moral and material progress. The individual who has taken a vow can become a radiant center point among multitudinous other center points in ever-expanding circles of humanity. The vast potential of Truth-force lies in the bosom of the unconditional person, heroically determined to serve the family of man within the microcosm of his own community or village. The latter is critical since Gandhi makes it eminently clear that the individual can only realize his true nature within the context of the expanding concentric circles of life: the family, the community, the nation, the world. Self-actualization can only occur in the midst of society, not apart from it.

Most importantly, and what separates Gandhi from many social philosophers, is that he felt that the recognition of, and reverence for, the Moral Law is the beginning of all true individuation, of our willingness to serve the common good. Since, as Gandhi states, the Moral Law is self-acting, it is up to us to choose to cooperate with it in practice. To do so is to align one's will with the will of God or Truth.

The Moral Law, or *karma*, in Hinduism, is that fundamental law that pertains to the unfoldment of consciousness within the vestures of matter and circumstance. It is that which regulates the subtle interrelationship between mind, passions and actions in the interconnected web of all life. Our cooperation with the Moral Law eventually elevates us toward God-realization and our resistance to it catapults us into the pits of self-degradation and misery.

To put this in a different way, the Moral Law is that self-acting, self-regulating principle which connects, separates and reconnects individuals and societies. It points to a hidden, but apprehensible, moral order within all human communities which continually adjusts the divisive asymmetries of individual and social life. It is primarily cognizable at the human level in terms of the unitary and unifying principles of Justice, Right and Equality.

The individual must consciously embrace universal values and focus on duty. Because of his conviction in the Moral Law, Gandhi rejected Utilitarianism as a moral philosophy that is basically pernicious because it is concerned with the physical and economic happiness of the majority, not with the welfare of all. Such a moral philosophy justifies the most horrific actions on the minority. The one thing that a Utilitarian could never do, to be logical, is to sacrifice himself for the good of the whole. The latter is the *sine qua non* of the devotee to universal welfare.

If this is true, then universal welfare calls for increasing degrees of moral individuation. It calls for the individual to assume increasing degrees of moral responsibility – for oneself, one's family, one's nation and, ultimately, the world. As pointed out by Professor Iyer in *Parapolitics: Toward the City of Man*, 'individuation' means the increasing recognition by the individual of the genuine moral claims of others in ever-expanding circles of brotherhood. In this sense, to become a true 'individual' is not simply a physiological or psychological process. To 'individuate' is to become

increasingly self-regulating in relation to the pursuit of moral ideals in the arena of family and community life. The test of one's status as a mature agent of *Sarvodaya* is the extent to which one is concerned with justice and equity for all and not simply for oneself, one's family, one's race or one's religion. Understandably, the more one individuates, morally speaking, the more he willingly accepts responsibility for the woes of others and actively seeks to ameliorate the conditions of his fellow human beings in his immediate as well as in distant locales.

Unlike many mechanistic moralists or even good hearted philanthropists, Gandhi saw moral growth dynamically. We might say that moral growth is a function of cooperating with the 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' forces of the Moral Law. The 'centripetal' aspect of the moral life involves increasingly containing our desires and wants, hedging them in, encircling them, sifting them, reducing them to the purest human wish to serve, or the will 'to do good'. Thus, as Gandhi insisted, the essence of morality is self-restraint, self-discipline and ego-cancellation. This is what separates man from the beast. The beginning of morality is thus mental renunciation, what the Buddha specified as the third Noble Truth, the path to which is given in the Fourth Noble Truth or the Noble Eightfold Path.

This is perhaps why Gandhi used the word 'non-violence' instead of love to characterize 'ahimsa'. First, we must recognize and subordinate the selfish self, the urge to aggression, to possessiveness, to self-imposition, to self-aggrandizement. We must blunt the will to exploit and to get revenge. Moral self-restraint is the beginning of the moral and ethical life. It begins with intelligent negation of the all too appropriating 'I', but, positively speaking, it is of immediate benefit to others since we are controlling ourselves and beginning the processes of releasing our better self within the dynamics of daily duties.

Well, we might ask, is morality nothing but self-restraint and gritting one's teeth? No. The other aspect of the moral life is the 'centrifugal'. The centrifugal is the creative impulse toward the universal, the expansive. It is to joyously draw the wider circle. It is the calm recognition that Truth, Justice and Right are all inclusive, though varied in their expression and instantiation. It calls for controlled thought and most especially for constructive imagination. It can only be released and directed with increasing precision when one has trained oneself in the ancient art of self-containment, of diminishing one's shadow out of a desire to release the

healing presence of the light within. By negating violence in ourselves, we gradually and thoughtfully give birth to 'truth force', a transforming agent for good. This all occurs in consciousness but can only be tested and refined in the realm of social interaction and creative encounter.

This is the portrait of the morally strong, the individual who is self-consciously committed to the pursuit of *Sarvodaya*. In the morally weak or deluded, the opposite occurs, the dynamic is inverted. The polarities of the 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' reverse. We expand and multiply wants indiscriminately or in terms of our immediate interests. We insist on more than we need and are indifferent to the deprivation of others. While diversifying desires and attachments, we constrict and consolidate our perspectives. Our views of truth, right and goodness become parochial and pinched. This is really, from Gandhi's point of view, the actual dynamics of modern power politics – whether communistic, socialistic or democratic. Most political activity is apt to be self-constrictive, self-aggrandizing and for the benefit of the few. This is not inevitable but usually true due to the greed and monopoly by the few and the moral complacency of the many.

True moral action elevates others and does not exploit the weak and the ignorant. It educates the ignorant, inspires confidence in the discouraged and consecrates all talents, abilities and wealth to the common weal.

What then is the ideal social order that maximizes the good of all? Or, to put it differently, can Truth, Non-violence and creative suffering apply not only to the individual, but to societies as well? Can communities deliberately adopt the modalities and disciplines of the higher virtues without becoming either monasteries or military states? Can *Sarvodaya* be embodied in the social order and thereby permeate social, political and economic activities? To draw from *Parapolitics: Toward the City of Man*, can modern satanic societies become genuine moral communities? According to Gandhi, they can. Gandhi's vision of a *Sarvodayan* society is embryonic, but nonetheless engaging and stimulating:

*My idea of Village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet inter-dependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. (Socialism of My Conception, pg 145)*

First, it is important to understand that from Gandhi's point of view, no ideology and no one particular form of government is equivalent to truth nor can it embody the universal good. Each ideal form of government or ideology is a relative truth and is always subservient to the social good. Universal welfare is an ethical principle or ideal, not a political or economic one *per se*. The political and economic patterns are secondary and regulated by the ethical and the social.

The *Sarvodaya* society is one that is based on Truth and Non-violence, with trusteeship as its fulcrum point. *Satyagraha*, holding onto truth and non-cooperating with evil, would be its mode of resolving disagreements. Such a society, which might be termed 'non-violent socialism', is dedicated to complete equality, to uplifting each and every individual, irrespective of caste, religion, sex or occupation. It includes the 'haves' as well as 'the have nots'. It provides for the criminal as well as the upright citizen. Its primary conviction is the inherent equality of all.

The primary focus of universal welfare is the village or the small community. The microcosmic community is the building block of a nation. It is, as Gandhi said, the center of expanding concentric circles that interlock at many different points. The 'village' is the symbol of humanity in miniature, of humanity compressed into the immediate orbit of our multiple personal and social obligations. It is a community of duties not rights, of cooperation not competition. It can only regenerate itself through initiatives from the individual within the context of the local, but only from the standpoint of a shared vision. This is the principle of *swadeshi*, or the principle of using and serving one's immediate surroundings – religious, political and economic.

Gandhi insists that in the ideal community, there would be no high or low, as all would be equally worthy, and, in a Kantian sense, possessed of an innate moral dignity. Even though the head is higher than the soles of the feet, says Gandhi, both are equally important for the well being of the entire physical body. So no individual, no matter how gifted or talented is above another. All roles are equally important and all meritorious praise would flow to those who had distinguished themselves by service, i.e., had morally individuated.

Trusteeship is the operative principle of social transformation and periodic renewal. The trustee holds all talent and wealth in trust for the common



good. He or she will act on behalf of the least. Periodically, the trustee will be called upon to relinquish whatever worldly goods surpass his actual needs. He will voluntarily redistribute his possessions among the less fortunate or less able. Such action increases his credibility as a conscientious contributor to the common good. His subsequent moral authority and social influence, if any, are not simply the result of his talent or his material wealth. The trustee's sterling reputation is earned by virtue of his willingness to renounce and return to the community what that very community made possible for him to accomplish and acquire. The trustee keenly recognizes that he owes his all to God, to Nature and to Man. He can not possibly justify holding on to more than he needs except under the aegis of trusteeship. Since Gandhi never believed in mechanical equality, he saw trusteeship as that dynamic which balances the natural asymmetries between individuals and communities of differing capacities and circumstances.

In a sense, the Trustee must emulate the Hindu *guru*. When a devotee puts a garland of flowers around the neck of a spiritual teacher, the spiritual teacher will graciously return it to the devotee. The garland is now magnetically blessed. It is a gift but with far greater value than when originally offered. When a trustee redistributes his influence or wealth, it is of far greater worth to the community than when he received it by his honest labor. His 'gift' not only increases the collective well being of the community, but it is now blessed by the sacrifice of hard work and the wish of the trustee to benefit the less fortunate. This kind of voluntary relinquishment is contagious and increases the prospect that trusteeship can be practiced by all. Trusteeship, then, should by no means be seen simply in terms of material redistribution, but in terms of moral uprightness and personal sacrifice, which can be practiced by the poor as well as the wealthy.

Trusteeship as a viable revolutionary force can be seen in the Bhoodan-Gramdan Movement initiated by Vinoba Bhave in the 1950s to combat the potential communist uprising among the landless in India. Bhave relentlessly pursued voluntary contributions from all landowners – whether of wealthy or moderate means – to be redistributed to the landless. In time, it saved India from a communist revolt by the dispossessed and desperate. (Bhave was once criticized for accepting a land donation from someone who had barely enough to sustain his family. The man donated it to the village elders to redistribute to the landless. Bhave commented that such an act shows that the spirit of sacrifice has no limits. He pointed out that such acts inspire

gratitude on the part of those receiving the gift and shame those who are reluctant to share.)

In the ideal village there would be education for children and adults and instruction would include not only the study of letters, but of health, hygiene and the like. All education would be compulsory until the final basic course. There would be a theater and a public hall as well. In addition, there would be a compulsory service of village guards who would be selected by rotation from the village registry. Untouchability would be completely eliminated. There would be absolute prohibition. There would be physical labor by all. In addition to agriculture, village industries such as spinning, soap making, paper making and tanning would abound. Unlike industrialized cities, villages would pursue labor activities in such a way that there would be a natural balancing of production and the distribution of goods. There would be no 'capitalism' or 'mass production' as conceived in the West and, as a result, no class wars. The whole community would be administered by a Panchyat or by five elders that were elected on an annual basis. The village sanction would be *Satyagraha*, or non-cooperation with the wrong doer.

By virtue of this 'model', and by virtue of the principle of *swadeshi* (local self-reliance), Gandhi believed that a village could become almost self-supporting and self-contained and a shining example of true *Swaraj* (self-rule). In time, villages would have not only skilled craftsmen but village poets, village artists, architects, linguists and research workers. "In short, there will be nothing in life worth having which will not be had in the village." (Ibid., pg 147.)

We might ask: "Isn't this rather idealistic and very difficult to accomplish?" Absolutely! Ideals and vows were both paramount to Gandhi. In a Gandhian sense, the end of every thought is an action. The significance of every noble ideal is its capacity to confront and transform current reality. The ideals that we enthusiastically embrace represent the 'active universal' within us. The thoughtful acts we initiate within the confines of our local political and economic communities constitute our opportunities to uplift and reform the actual, the limited, and the parochial. Man is the epicenter of all revolutionary change, the alchemical agent of social regeneration. Like Paine, Gandhi might say, "The birthday of a new world is at hand . . ." Only man can creatively reorder priorities, reconfigure personal and social relationships into a more Aquarian geometry and build a new Temple of *Civitas Humana* (City of Man).

I began with a mantram from Gandhi, and I will close with Gandhi's Talisman. The two prescriptions are connected. The first statement "Mediate on the millions of the dispossessed." invites us to transcend the self by contemplating the larger human condition. Gandhi's Talisman leads to self-forgetful action by drawing upon painful personal experience. Together they accentuate Gandhi's conviction that we can only discover Truth by responsible service to our neighbor who, for all intents and purposes, is humanity in miniature.

*I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test:*

***Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and the spiritually starving millions?***

*Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away.*

