

Ethics and Values
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Lecture – 4
Gandhi's philosophy on Truth

Hello friends!!

Now we know the meaning of ethics and the meaning of values. Right? And in the forthcoming lectures we will be discussing about the two prominent values – truth and non-violence, popularized by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, to the extent of making them the synonyms of his name. The principles of Truth and Non-violence were the most profound and positive forces that influenced Gandhi since his childhood. They are imbibed in his thoughts, words and deeds. Gandhi had an unqualified loyalty towards the principle of truth. Truth was embedded in him to such an extent that he was unwilling to negotiate or compromise it with anything, including the freedom of his beloved country. As he said: 'I would far rather that India perished than that she won freedom at the sacrifice of Truth'.

Gandhi's thoughts and ideas have their firm roots in the Indian traditions and philosophical sources. Gandhi grew up worshiping the Hindu god Vishnu and following Jainism, a morally rigorous ancient Indian religion that advocated non-violence, fasting, meditation and vegetarianism. Passion for Truth and non-violence was the dominating urge in his life and it gave him immense power over the minds and hearts of men. The same passion also led him to confess publicly his errors. Gandhi was a worshipper of truth and his life was nothing but an experiment with truth. Hence, he entitled his Autobiography 'The Story of My Experiments with Truth'.

Let's start to uncover Gandhi's views on Truth. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, was born on October 2, 1869, in Porbandar, Gujarat, which was then part of the British Empire. After struggling to find work as a lawyer in India, Gandhi obtained a one-year contract to perform legal services in South Africa. When Gandhi arrived in South Africa, he was quickly shocked by the discrimination and racial segregation faced by Indian immigrants at the hands of white British authorities. An important moment occurred on June 7, 1893, during a train trip, a white man objected to Gandhi's presence in the first class railway compartment, although he had a ticket. Refusing to move to the back of the train, Gandhi was forcibly removed and thrown off the train. Awakened by the socio-political discrimination followed by the British rule, Gandhi became the leader of India's non-violent independence movement.

Though we have heard about certain experiences of Gandhi since childhood but we cannot find a systematic account in his experiences and how in his personal life, he treaded the path of truth and how he remained firm in his resolve to adhere to truth all through his life. To Gandhi, truth is of its nature clear and self-evident; it is the means, instrument and the ultimate goal, all encompassed in one.

Unto Tahtinen explains in the book “The Core of Gandhi’s Philosophy” published in 1979 that Gandhi understood Truth in different ways. Sometimes, he spoke of Truth as truthfulness or the attempt to achieve Truth where the value truth signifies an ethical norm. Sometimes he called it as epistemological truth, that which we can know. Sometimes he meant absolute truth, God, fundamentally metaphysical reality. Sometimes he defined it as the final goal of life, moksha or the liberation. At other times, he proclaimed it as the Natural Right, ethical justice which is valid and binding all men.

Now, why did Gandhi view truth as God? He regarded Truth as satya. Satya is derived from Sat, which means being or that which exists. It is the truth that exists or pervades all. Truth, therefore, is the essence of what we call God or truth is perhaps the most important name of God. The word Chit or knowledge is also associated with God. Where there is true knowledge, there is always bliss (Ananda). Even as truth is eternal, so is the bliss derived from it. Hence we know God as Sat-Chit-Ananda, one who combines in Truth, Knowledge and Bliss. His understanding on Truth can be analysed through two standpoints – absolute truth and relative truth.

Now, before we going into absolute and relative truth, lets have a reflection spot. Which of the following books is the work of Gandhiji?

- a) Unto This Last
- b) The Discovery of India
- c) Hind Swaraj
- d) My Experiments with Truth
- e) Both c & d

Did you get the answer? I hope you got the correct answer which is option e. “Unto this Last” is an essay and book on economy by John Ruskin. Gandhi was very much influenced by this work. And “The Discovery of India”, as you all know was written by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and then comes “Hind Swaraj”. Hind swaraj or Indian Home Rule is a book written by Gandhiji where he describes his views on swaraj, modern civilization and mechanization etc. And “My experiments with truth”, you all know is his autobiography. Now, let us continue with Truth. As I said Gandhi distinguished between Absolute and Relative truths. Truth as such is a supreme principle. It includes the Absolute and Relative dimensions. As Gandhi said, ‘truth is not only Relative truth of our conception but the Absolute Truth, as the Eternal Principle, is God’. Therefore, the Absolute truth is God and the Relative truth is something what we perceive as truth.

For Gandhi, reaching pure or absolute Truth is like attaining Moksha or liberation or emancipation. As I mentioned earlier, Gandhi was thoroughly taken in by the Upanishadic tradition that describes God as Truth, knowledge and infinite. Relative truth, on the other hand, is not the truth but one’s truth, as perceived by the individual. The Relative truth is something what we perceive as truth. Relative truth enables man to reach their goals. These are partial expressions of absolute truth in different arenas of life. At the religious level, it is expressed as God, at the ethical level, as Ahimsa, at the social level as Sarvodaya and at the political level as Swaraj.

Relative truth enables man to reach his/her goal and through this he/she can realise God. Since we have spoken so much about truth, just think for a while, what is the importance of truth in our lives? Human relationships are based on the qualities of faith, tolerance, love, tenderness and humility. This quality enhances the character of a human being and allows one to take the path of humility. Humility augments the observance of truth. There are chances that as humans we might fall into egoism, anger, hatred, jealousy which is a major hindrance in the path of truth and self-realisation. And as humans it is difficult to avoid such emotions and we should learn to handle them as we cannot avoid them completely. Further, adherence to truth in thought, word and deed sets an exemplary life and creates harmony among the human beings. Truth is also the very path to self-realisation and further, towards the attainment of liberation. It can also be said that Gandhi set an example to all both in his private as well as in his public life. His inspiration to utter truth from the stories of King Harischandra, his honest confessions to his father, his resolve to keep the promise to his mother while he was overseas, his truthful approach during his struggles in South Africa and later in India-all prove his sincerity to adhere to what he believed as the highest divine form.

So, through this lecture, I hope you might have understood the importance of Truth in our life and also Gandhi's philosophy on truth. In the next class, we will discuss Gandhi's philosophy on non-violence. Let me end this lecture by quoting Gandhi, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong".

Thank you,