Selected Writings of MAHATMA GANDHI

Selected and introduced by RONALD DUNCAN

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INTRODUCTION

What are my credentials for making this selection or for writing about Mahatma Gandhi? The reader has a right to ask that question. Before he can assess the accuracy of an account, he must first know something about the historian. There is no such thing as complete objectivity especially in human relationships and we delude ourselves when we pretend that there is. Though detachment must always be the biographer's aim, he can never achieve it; and more often than not he succeeds in revealing nothing but himself. This being so, perhaps he should in the first place admit to those factors which have probably limited his vision and thus give the reader the chance to make adjustments accordingly. With this purpose in mind, the following facts concerning myself may not appear wholly irrelevant.

In 1937 I was only twenty-two, and that is probably not the best age at which one can assess the achievements or the personality of a philosopher of sixty. Furthermore, the nineteen-thirties produced a particularly raw type of young man, to which I was no exception. It was a decade of political arrogance and spiritual apathy: the air was thick with so-called progressive thought which approved of nothing in the past, but for all that claimed to be omniscient with regard to the future; the lessons of history were disregarded, tradition was derided; and though everything was explained, nothing was understood. It was a period of naïveté.

As soon as I came down from the University, I busied myself about reforming everything, excluding myself. Many of my friends were equally active in the same conveniently extrovert fashion. On one side it must be said that we were genuinely perplexed by the seeming paradox of poverty amongst plenty which we saw around us, and in various ways we sought to do something about this condition. At this time there were nearly three million unemployed; and this factor accounted for the extreme views to which many of us then inclined. We made the mistake of assuming that the cure for this social disease was as obvious as the symptoms were apparent. It proved otherwise.

For several months I worked in a Yorkshire coal-field as a miner. My duties were to look after the pit ponies at the bottom of the shaft. I was not a member of any political party; I was not an agitator, and if I had been, the work down the mine was so exhausting that I should not have had the energy for such activities. I told myself I was living as a working man in order to understand him. Perhaps it was merely an adventure. However, this is not the place to describe it.

Soon after I left the colliery and returned to London, a stay-in strike occurred in the Rhondda Valley. I immediately went there, for I now had some practical knowledge of the miners' conditions: they had been my own. The miners had struck without their Union’s support. For four days and nights thirty of
them had remained down, refusing to come to the surface. I stood with the worried women at the top of the shaft.

It then occurred to me that if only these strikers could refrain from all violence and continue their passive resistance they might in time arouse the conscience of the owners and the nation; and, by these means, achieve for themselves more than political theories could do for them. Their wives prepared food to be lowered down the shaft. I smuggled some chewing tobacco into the basket and a note to their leader urging him to continue his non-violent resistance. But to no avail. The Communists exploited the situation; violence broke out, the police had then sufficient cause to act; the public lost their sympathy with the strike and it eventually petered out. I myself was denounced by the Communists who informed the police that I was an *agent provocateur*. I was arrested as a vagrant, but eventually allowed my freedom.

This experience convinced me of the importance of passive resistance. I could see the need of personal discipline even in industrial disputes. This realization turned me from all the current political theories with their ridiculous simplifications. Dimly, I perceived that what our age needed most was saints, not politicians.

True to type, I wrote a pamphlet about the matter and as nobody would sell it when it was printed, I posted the copies away to anybody whose name came to my mind. One of these was, of course, Mahatma Gandhi.

To my surprise, he treated my silly essay seriously and wrote a long letter to me on this question of discipline. We continued to correspond. There was no air mail then, it took me six weeks to get an answer. With my usual impatience I sent him a post card suggesting we should meet. He took me at my word and cabled his reply: 'Meet me Wardha on the 23rd inst.'

I remember that I was sitting playing chess in Amen Court with the late Dick Sheppard at the time when I received it. The first thing was to find an atlas to discover the whereabouts of Wardha. I then realized that if I was to keep the appointment I had to get to the very centre of India within a month. Sheppard advised me to go. He was at this time running the Peace Pledge Movement and urged me to ask Gandhi’s advice on several matters.

So within a couple of days I left London. Benjamin Britten and Henry Boys came as far as Paris with me. There was a feeling I should never return and Britten worried lest I might become a yogi in Tibet.

The journey was uneventful except for the fact that I discovered a detective had been detailed to accompany me. We used to play poker together.

I reached Wardha on the 23rd. At the station I looked for a taxi. There were none. I was persuaded to hire a primitive vehicle called a tonga. It resembled Boadicea’s chariot, it had wooden wheels without any kind of rims or tyres, three hand-sawn planks constituted the body and these were nailed direct on to the axle. The emaciated driver sat on the shaft and steered the lean bullock by twisting its bony tail. There were no reins, no springs and no road. It was all ruts and bumps. I do not know how far Gandhi’s Ashram was from Wardha station. I shall always believe it was too far. After half an hour of bumping across an arid, infertile scrubland I could do no more than cling on for I now lacked the strength to fling myself off.

Suddenly the sadistic and reckless driver pointed out some figure

walking towards us; I was too shaken to be interested. But the driver pulled up and there was Gandhi smiling mischievously above me. He had walked three miles to meet me. I crawled off my tonga quite expecting him to congratulate me on my survival, or at least make some comment on my arrival, for I had travelled several thousand miles to keep this appointment.

'As I was saying in my last letter,' he began before I had time to dust the tonga off my back,
'means must determine ends and indeed it's questionable in human affairs whether there is an
end. The best we can do is to make sure of the method and examine our motive....'

Whereupon we began to walk across this desert scrub, continuing our discussion as though neither
time nor place had interrupted our correspondence. I noted Gandhi never referred to my arrival -
which I suppose was one way of making me feel at home and saved us the time of discussing
something of no consequence.

For the rest of our walk he continued to discuss the ethics of action and he explained what he
meant by 'selfless action' -- 'I will give you a Gita as soon as we get in'. He also asked me about
the pacifist organizations in England.

I told him that one of their difficulties was the expense of propaganda. He smiled ruefully at this.

'The right action contains its own propaganda and needs no other,' he said. 'It's the same with all
these movements, societies, or sects, they waste their time and energies saying what everybody
ought to do, but if they themselves were to act up to their own principles that would be sufficient
and arresting propaganda. Truth needs no publicity other than itself and like a small stone thrown
into a pond, its ripples will in time inevitably reach the circumference. The only thing to consider is
the solidity and the weight of the stone....'

Eventually we reached Gandhi's Ashram and he immediately showed me round. He called it
'Segoan' and had settled there some years before when he announced his intention of withdrawing
from Congress and devoting his life to the betterment of the Indian villages.

I think he had chosen this site for two reasons -- firstly, because the neighbouring village was one
of the most backward in the
country; and secondly because the natural conditions could not have been more difficult. It looked like
a desert; indeed it was one, except where Gandhi's efforts had produced this small oasis of fertility
around his Ashram.

This tiny settlement built of adobe had now become the political and spiritual centre of India. It
consisted of a simple oneroomed house with verandas on two sides. We ate our meals on one and I
kept my belongings on the other. There was no furniture or decorations of any kind. The walls were of
mud or adobe: the floor was swept earth, trodden hard. This was Gandhi's workroom. There was a rug
and a spinning-wheel on the floor and in front of this a soap box which served as his desk. I observed
that it was inscribed with the word 'Lifebuoy'. Yet it contained his library; there were five books; I
noticed one was by Tolstoy.

Adjoining Gandhi's cell were several others in which Miss Slade and the other members of the Ashram
lived. Here, too, they used to teach the village children.

These buildings were enclosed by a bamboo stockade in one corner of which three or four villagers
were pressing sugar cane and, in another, a great draught bullock trod an endless journey drawing
water from a well to water the extensive kitchen garden.

Outside the stockade, Gandhi showed me his idea of a lavatory. This consisted of a narrow hand-dug
trench with a portable shelter.

'You've no idea how difficult it is to persuade the villagers to bury their excreta,' he told me. I little
guessed then that I was soon to discover.

The kitchen consisted of a pump and a fire, both in the open. On the veranda opposite sat a middle-
aged woman shelling peas with remarkable dexterity. Gandhi introduced me to her. It was his wife,
Kasturbai. She seemed very shy and could not speak English. As soon as we had moved away he told
me that twenty years ago he had undertaken a vow of chastity. And with the amazing frankness which
later I was to take for granted, he said that he had married at an early age. He paused. 'I was only
thirteen.' He told me how Hindu parents waste so much time and money over the marriage celebrations of their children, who are themselves often unaware of their betrothal. And how his father and mother had decided to stage one extravagant celebration and marry him and his two brothers off in a grand triple wedding. Only when he was measured for new clothes did he realize that his wife had been chosen. He told me, too, of the nes and the agony of intimacy he and his wife felt when thrust into this premature wedlock.

I formed the impression that Gandhi, the reformer, was born on his own wedding night.

'The marriage was unhappy at the start owing to my jealousy and I have never forgiven myself for all the sensualism I indulged in which left me no time to teach my wife. She remains almost illiterate. As you notice, she cannot speak English.'

For my part I had thought no less of her for this lack and indeed her homeliness had attracted me as a relief from Gandhi's own intellectualism. I was unable to understand his sense of guilt in this respect, nor could I appreciate his concern that Kasturbai could only speak Gujarati. After all, I thought, she can shell peas.

But even so, I realized then that Gandhi's child marriage had left him with a deep sense of shame which nobody could remove. There is a tragic passage in his autobiography which reveals this:

'The time of which I am now speaking is my sixteenth year. My father, as we have seen, was bedridden, suffering from a fistula. My mother, an old servant of the house and I were his principal attendants. I had the duties of a nurse, which mainly consisted in dressing the wound, giving my father his medicine, and compounding drugs whenever they had to be made up at home. Every night I massaged his legs and retired only when he asked me to do so or after he had fallen asleep. I loved to do this service. I do not remember ever having neglected it. All the time at my disposal, after the performance of the daily duties, was divided between schools and attending on my father. I would only go out for an evening walk either when he permitted me or when he was feeling well.

'This was also the time when my wife was expecting a baby -- a circumstance which, as I can see today, meant a double shame for me. For one thing I did not restrain myself, as I should have done, whilst I was yet a student. And secondly, this carnal lust got the better of what I regarded as my duty to study and of what was even a greater duty, my devotion to my parents, Shraven having been my ideal since childhood. Every night whilst my hands were busy massaging my father's legs, my mind was hovering about the bedroom -- and that too at a time when religion, medical science, and common sense alike forbade sexual intercourse. I was always glad to be relieved from my duty, and went straight to the bedroom after doing obeisance to my father....

'The dreadful night came. My uncle was then in Rajkot. I have a faint recollection that he came to Rajkot having had news that my father was getting worse. The brothers were deeply attached to each other. My uncle would sit near my father's bed the whole day, and would insist on sleeping by his bedside after sending us all to sleep. No one had dreamt that this was to be the fateful night. The danger of course was there.

'It was 10.30 or 11 p.m. I was giving the massage. My uncle offered to relieve me. I was glad and went straight to the bedroom. My wife, poor thing, was fast asleep. But how could she sleep when I was there? I woke her up. In five or six minutes, however, the servant knocked at the door. I started with alarm. "Get up," he said, "Father is very ill." I knew of course that he was very ill, and so I guessed what "very ill" meant at that moment. I sprang out of bed.

"What is the matter? Do tell me!"

"Father is no more."
'So all was over! I had but to wring my hands. I felt deeply ashamed and miserable. I ran to my father's room. I saw that, if animal passion had not blinded me, I should have been spared the torture of separation from my father during his last moments. I should have been massaging him and he would have died in my arms. But now it was my uncle who had had this privilege. He was so deeply devoted to his elder brother that he had earned the honour of doing him the last services. My father forebodings of the coming event. He had made a sign for pen and paper and written: "Prepare for the last rites." He had then snapped the amulet off his arm and also his gold necklace of tulasi-beads and flung them aside. A moment after this he was no more.

'The shame, to which I have referred in a foregoing chapter, was this shame of my carnal desire even at the critical hour of my father's death, which demanded wakeful service. It is a blot I have never been able to efface or forget, and I have always thought that, although my devotion to my parents knew no bounds and I would have given up anything for it, yet it was weighed and found unpardonably wanting because my mind was at the same moment in the grip of lust. I have therefore always regarded myself as a lustful, though a faithful, husband. It took me long to get free from the shackles of lust, and I had to pass through many ordeals before I could overcome it.'

Gandhi then went on to speak to me about the necessity of continence and chastity in the pursuit of Brahmacharya. I felt that our respective ages gave him a natural advantage in this discussion.

After he had shown me round the rest of his Ashram, he introduced me to Miss Slade, or Mira Ben, to use the Indian name she adopted when she became a devoted follower of the Mahatma. She wore a plain white Indian costume, not a sari, but such as the Untouchable beggars wear. Her grey hair was entirely shaven. This forbidding appearance did nothing to conceal the warm kindness of the woman. Often I used to go to her bare little cell and watch her teaching the village children to spin cotton or attend to their filthy sores, and I was always struck by the essentially English thoroughness of her work. No shaven head or loin-cloth of coarse linen could hide those qualities. I formed the impression that she was a character as courageous and as resolute as Florence Nightingale.

I also met Rakumari Amrit Kaur, an Indian princess who had given her estate away and joined the community. She was a most educated and very beautiful woman who combined the best of the West with all the grace of the East.

Others in the Ashram included Gandhi's two pretty granddaughters who were devoted to him, and a young man called Pyaralel who had abandoned a promising university career for a religious life. He acted as Gandhi's amanuensis.

I was then told the discipline which the Ashram followed. 'We rise at 4 a.m. for communal prayers,' Gandhi said slyly, 'but I shall not expect you to attend. After which we do our toilet, breakfast, and then work.'

He suggested that I should talk with him alone for two hours every morning and then accompany him on his walk. He outlined the rest of the day. Every moment was devoted to service to the neighbouring village -- except for those times which were given to regular prayer and meditation.

I had brought a bed-roll with me and the first night I slept on this on the veranda. I was wakened by the sound of a chant; its rhythm was the most complex I have ever heard. The stars were still shining; it was 4 a.m. All the members of the Ashram were sitting in a circle round a log fire in the open, Gandhi was reading the vedas and after each sloka the others chanted the responses. I did not understand a single word but the rhythm was articulate by itself.

After this service we used to wash and breakfast on figs and the green loose-skinned nagpuri oranges. Then everybody would go to their tasks just as it became light. The Ashram was veterinary college,
dispensary, hospital and school to the village, to which the peasants used to come with their ailing animals and children for free medical service and instruction in husbandry and rural crafts.

‘Patient example is the only possible method to effect a reform,’ Gandhi told me as we walked through the sugar-cane plantations, towards the little village which was a mere collection of fly-blown and squalid shacks, an eyrie for well-fed vultures.

‘This is the real India,’ said the voice beside me, ‘it is one which visitors to the Taj Mahal seldom see.’

The hovels were improvised, not built. Their walls were of mud, their roofs of flattened petrol cans, tattered mats in place of doors; and none of them could boast a window. But it was not the extreme poverty and filth of the place which appalled me most, but the complete inertia of the derelict inhabitants. They were too emaciated for work, too apathetic for hope. There they sat in front of their homes without, even the energy to remove the flies settling on their sores. I tried to compare this sight before me with the slums of the Rhondda Valley, but there was no point of comparison. The dour streets of inhabited tombstones in which the colliers lived were gay and neat cottages compared to this.

Gandhi let me absorb the scene. ‘Hardly the brightest jewel, is it?’ he said. ‘There are tens of millions living like this; usury has brought them to it -- they are mortgaged three generations ahead and what they sow the moneylender and the tax collector harvest.’ He told me of the injustice of a fixed charge, that is to say, taxes which are not computed on the yield of the harvest, but a relentless burden when drought produces insufficient even for next year’s seed.

As we stood there I noticed four or five men were squatting in front of us. They were relieving themselves. I glanced around me: what I had taken to be the droppings of dogs was, I realized, all human excreta. It was outside the hovels, it was beside their only well...no wonder the people were ridden by disease and the children poxed with sores.

Gandhi stood silent. A look of intense pity and sorrow came into his face. There was no anger. He did not step forward and give them a lecture on hygiene or modern sanitation. He did not plead, cajole or reprimand. But with the same expression of abject humility as though he himself was personally to blame for all this suffering and filth, began to scavenge the excreta and bury it with his own hand. As we did this together, the villagers at first stood by and watched. Then the example of their beloved Mahatma worked upon them. He was clearing their filth away without a look or a word of complaint. Within a few minutes the villagers began to follow his example. Gandhi’s act of selfless action, of service, had achieved in a moment what coercion or teaching could not have done in a century.

Here was an example of practical politics, of applied religion, an excellent introduction to philosophy. I had come to India to talk to Gandhi-- but this incident taught me more than all the discussions we had.

When we had finished cleaning round the well, Gandhi took me into one of the ‘houses’. It was dark, entirely unfurnished, a sort of noisy grave with tubercular children in fly-blown corners. The smell made me feel sick. To my surprise I saw that his face was now radiant with pleasure. I looked for the cause. In a corner of the room sat a woman using a charka, or home-made spinning wheel. Another example of his had been followed.

As we walked home, he told me something of the economics of rural India and how many of the village crafts had been so discouraged and neglected as to be forgotten.

‘For instance, they go without sugar though these palms above them will yield it if only they are tapped in the proper manner. And the Government has, by taxing Indian cloth to encourage Lancashire exports, left us almost naked, though cotton will grow here and used to be spun in the homes.’
He explained his Khadi Movement and how he had made a vow many years ago to spin so many yards of yarn every day. The result was that cheap Indian cloth could now be bought in many villages. And that evening he gave me a portable spinning wheel which was fitted into a little case and a blue rug made from cloth he himself had spun.

'The spinning wheel is not only the very symbol of passive resistance,' he said, 'it is also a means of meditation. And so long as the peasants spin they have their self-respect and a measure of independence.'

I began to understand what he meant by the relation of religion to politics. 'Every act', he would repeat almost daily to me, 'has its spiritual, economic and social implications. The spirit is not separate. It cannot be.' This point of view was, I think, his most important contribution to twentieth-century thought. It was the base of all his activities. Those people who ask whether Gandhi was a saint or a statesman do not begin to understand him or his achievement. He was one because he was the other; in him they were identified, and this was the secret of his success as a politician and his integrity as a religious man.

The midday meal at the Ashram was taken squatting on the veranda. I used to sit next to Gandhi for he was most concerned that I should eat enough. The food was vegetarian and was quite delicious. I was particularly fond of the hand-ground bread with white butter. The only condiment allowed was salt, as Gandhi disapproved of all seasoning and would not permit the Indian curry to be served as he maintained that such seasoning not only ruined the palate but was bad for the health and aggravated the senses. He said curries were aphrodisiacs.

He told me that though he had been born into a religious sect which practised strict vegetarianism, he had once tried meat eating. Apparently when he was at school the doggerel rhyme --

Behold the mighty Englishman
He rules the Indian small
Because he is a meat eater
And is five cubits tall.

-- had persuaded him to change his diet. This step meant breaking with the habits of his parents and the strict rules of his religion and had to be done in secret. But he told me, 'Since I wanted to be strong and daring and free my country from the English, I decided on the experiment.' He and a friend went to a lonely spot by a river and there ate some goat's flesh. That night he had a nightmare and dreamed that a live goat was bleating inside him. He persisted in these surreptitious feasts for a time but eventually returned to the diet of his forefathers.

Such detailed principles of diet and behaviour did not make Gandhi a prig or deprive him of his sense of humour. One day I noticed that whereas I and other members of the Ashram ate off brass plates, Gandhi used an old battered tin bowl. I asked him why he preferred it.

'It was given to me when I first went to prison, and as I'm always ready to go back there it's only right that I should continue to use the bowl.'

He spoke of his prison days with joy and with genuine gratitude to those who had detained him. You cannot punish a man who is grateful for the punishment and insists on regarding his jailer as his host. Every privation only enriched him. His dignity lay in the acceptance of every humiliation.

Yet in counterpoint to these qualities he had a wry and mischievous side to him. I was never sure when he was not teasing me. And when people began to praise him to excess or almost deify him, as some of his followers did, his defence was to turn imp.

I remember once when he asked me to accompany him to Wardha where he had promised to attend a conference of Anglican bishops in India. We did not travel by tonga; an open car called for us. As we drove into the town, the car was pelted with flowers and surrounded. One earnest devotee, a girl of about twenty, jumped on to the running board in order to touch the Mahatma's
garment. As she leaned over to do so, Gandhi broke the spell by boyishly pulling her nose.

'I am not a god,' he used to complain to me, 'if the truth were known I am tempted more than most men -- but perhaps less than those who are sinners.' In that distinction was all of tolerance.

Another time, I myself had been asking him earnest questions about his 'Fast unto Death' for there is no doubt that he would have died voluntarily on that occasion if the Government had not been persuaded by opinion to act at the last moment.

'Do you know what I did on the first day of that fast?' he asked me. 'I got the prison dentist in to measure me up for this set of false teeth.'

Whether he meant by this that he had had no intention of fasting to death, or that he had ordered the teeth as an act of faith that the Government would recognize the righteousness of his cause, he didn't say. But in fact I discovered that the latter was his reason, though Gandhi told me the story in order to suggest the former out of modesty, and to make me believe that his will power was not as great as his reputation.

To say the least, I was most ill-prepared for the religious discipline and austerity of Gandhi's Ashram. I had come merely to talk -- there is nothing so comfortable as a discussion on remote ideals, but Gandhi would always take my theory gently by the scruff of its neck and rub my nose in the practical and personal implication. It was a useful but painful lesson. In this connection, one day he interrupted one of my more abstract dissertations with a little story from the life of Buddha, which I suspect I have not remembered correctly, but it is probably well known.

'The Buddha had a young disciple', Gandhi told me, 'whom the Master left in the desert promising to return to him in three years to see how he had progressed. During this time the disciple built a house which he proudly showed the Buddha when he returned. The Master examined it and then told the disciple to take the house to pieces and erect it again a few paces farther away, promising to return in another three years. The disciple did as he was instructed. The Master returned, examined the house again, but told the young man that he must now abandon it altogether and sit by the river and meditate, promising to return again at the end of another three years. The disciple did as he was instructed. When the Master at last returned he asked the disciple what he had done with his time. "I can now walk across on the surface of the river without getting my feet wet," the young man boasted. "Then you have wasted your time," said Buddha, "for there is a ferry just round the corner."

The implications of this parable were not entirely lost on me. Gandhi was the most practical man I have ever met. He would always drive any thought to its personal implication and practical application.

When I arrived at the Ashram I was a heavy smoker -- and of course nobody there ever indulged in that habit. I used to steal off somewhat furtively into a field of sugar cane where I had first to overcome my horror of snakes before hiding in the crop to light a cigarette. But Gandhi was not to be deceived. He took my addiction to this habit very seriously, and in order to help me break it he told me how he and a friend had once become fond of smoking and used as children to pick up the ends of cigarettes which his uncle threw away. 'The stumps were not very satisfactory and so we began to steal the servants' pocket money in order to buy them. But even so we found it intolerable to have to smoke in secret and eventually we became so disgusted with these parental restrictions that we decided to commit suicide. We stole off into the jungle and tried to poison ourselves with some seeds but were so frightened of dying we only took sufficient to give us stomachache. However, it cured me of smoking -- but not from stealing. I once stole some gold out of my brother's armlet and was then so overcome with remorse that I wrote out a full confession and gave it to my father. He read it. He said nothing. He only wept. This was for me an important object lesson in ahimsa-- of love.'
As Gandhi told me this incident, I was again made aware of how most of his convictions sprang from his experiences as a child. His love for his parents and the fact that they were both deeply religious people were factors which could not be underestimated in assessing the growth of his character.

His concern about my smoking became of great importance to him. Urgent matters of political moment, correspondence with the Viceroy, were all put aside to keep me provided with toffee made out of the palm sugar as a substitute for cigarettes.

'If you can't master yourself in this,' Gandhi used to say, 'how can you hope to do anything else?' And he would then quote the Gita and tell me that detachment from the senses was the first step in the ladder, without which nothing.

And even after I left the Ashram, Gandhi continued to worry. When I arrived at Bombay to take a boat home, a large parcel of toffee was already on the boat to help me on the voyage. When I reached Port Sudan, there was a letter already there, in his own hand, begging me not to smoke.

After lunch, it was the custom for the members of the Ashram to retire and meditate. I soon realized that a voyage up the unexplored regions of the Amazon would be an easy expedition compared with a journey into my own mind. It is an extremely embarrassing experience to discover the shallowness of one's own thought and complete inability to concentrate.

'Meditation is not for him who eats too much, nor for him who eats not at all, nor for him who is over-addicted to sleep, nor for him who is always awake.'

After a few days, Gandhi took me for a long walk till we came to a little hut in a clearing. The occupant had put himself under Gandhi's teaching. He was what is termed a Yogi; and had been in this place for over a year. The hut was no more than a summerhouse and contained no furniture except a table and a chair. There were no papers or books. I commented on this. 'The sacrifice of wisdom is superior to any material sacrifice; for, O Arjuna, the climax of action is always Realization,' he murmured. I stayed talking to him for several hours. This man had the physique of a boxer and the poise of a dancer. There was about him a lake of calmness; being with him was a kind of solitude. He emitted peace in the same way as a heater radiates warmth.

When I was taking my leave I noticed there was a chill in the evening air. I glanced round his bare hut -- 'Don't you ever catch cold?' I asked him.

'No,' he said with a simplicity which was without a trace of pride, 'I do not allow them....'

So, that night, I foolishly abandoned the luxury of my bed-roll on the veranda and followed Gandhi out into the open where he used to sleep on the damp ground. I awoke with a heavy dew on me and a severe chill. However, I persisted in sleeping in the open till the chill got steadily worse. Gandhi was sympathetic but in no way alarmed at my sneezes. I also had a temperature and the discomfort of a stiff neck. Eventually, when leaving the Ashram to visit a colony of Untouchables, he sent me to an osteopath who strapped me into a vertical machine. A lever was pulled and the contraption flung me violently on to my back. I was released -- not a single trace of my influenza remained.

As I had daily conversations with Gandhi, I had a unique opportunity to study both the man and his ideas. But I was too young to appreciate much at the time. I can correct some of my youthful impressions, but no more; what was hidden from me then, cannot be recalled now.

There is no need to describe his appearance: his features were frequently photographed. But I shall always remember the anachronism of the large cheap watch which dangled on a safety-pin attached to his loin-cloth: worn this way, time itself appeared to be a toy, an invention of the Western mind.
His face was too animated to give the impression of serenity; his mind too active to suggest repose. Though his dress was almost comical in its simplicity, with his shaven head, steel-rimmed glasses and single tooth, yet one was unaware of his appearance, and only impressed by his extraordinary strength of will. His humility was so complete as to be the very essence of dignity. His hands, like all Indians', were extremely beautiful -- with thousands of years of craft in his long supple fingers, by comparison with which any Western hand is a clumsy paw.

During these discussions he never raised his voice above a whisper and the spinning wheel was never still.

I told him of my experience of the stay-in strike in the coal-mine at the Rhondda Valley, and asked him what training was required for passive resistance. His answer was, of course, such as to leave English politics far behind. 'There is no short cut,' he told me, 'but the way of the spirit which is one of detachment, of self-abnegation, of being unattached to all desires. If such truth resides in one man, all follows inevitably from him. But without that essence, nothing.'

All conversations, whatever their point of departure, returned to the teachings of the Gita, the gospel of selfless action. And there was always his insistence that there was no life but a spiritual life.

'The spirit of the Gita permeates all things,' he would say, 'and I see no reason why it should not permeate man himself. The Gita is the embodiment of the essence of all spiritual teaching. It teaches the way of the spirit, which is one of detachment, self-abnegation, and being unattached to all desires. If such truth resides in one man, all follows inevitably from him. But without that essence, nothing.'

All conversations, whatever their point of departure, returned to the teachings of the Gita, the gospel of selfless action. And there was always his insistence that there was no life but a spiritual life.

'I do not believe that the spiritual law works on a plane of its own' he used to say and he had no patience with what he called 'the futility of mere religious knowledge'. To Gandhi the whole of life resided in every part. He did not allow the distinctions -religion, culture, politics or art. His insistence on the necessity of being unattached to the senses reminded me of Jerome's vow not to read poetry. I could not understand him when he used to tell me that all sensual gratification is sin. And I used to disagree. I remember that I argued on the lines that it did not matter what one loved but how; the object being unimportant, the quality, the purity of love, being all important. To my mind the legend of 'Le Jongleur de Notre Dame' is an example of this.

Gandhi saw sin in every sensual pleasure. It seemed to amount to a nausea with life itself. I was at times reminded of the pettiness of English Puritanism and I suggested that perhaps the most perverse sensual gratification was to be obtained not by satisfying one's senses, but by denying them satisfaction. Gandhi smiled at this. 'That is also a danger,' he said, 'but there is no point in renouncing an object that one still desires.'

With infinite patience and good humour he tried to make me understand the difference between what I called Puritanism and what he referred to as Brahmacharya. 'What you are talking about amounts to a mere negation of this life, but what I am talking about is a means to an everlasting life. There is a difference between renouncing an object and relinquishing it.' As usual he quoted the Gita. 'The sages say that renunciation means forgoing an action which springs from desire, and relinquishing means the surrender of its fruit.'

This last phrase 'the surrender of its fruit' was always on Gandhi's lips. It was the key to the philosophy of selfless action.

But in spite of his endless patience with me in these discussions, I refused to understand -- for at that age I was determined not to do so. In retrospect I realize that I did, but would not admit it. And in order to preserve my own tastes and habits I subconsciously began to seek points of disagreement
with all the desperation of a goldfish clinging to the little bowl I knew in preference to the lake I did not dare to experience.

One day during a walk, he defined sin to me as 'being acted upon by the senses'. I remember I instantly asked him if he considered listening to Mozart was a sin. The question was allimportant to me.

'All attachment to the senses is death', he replied. It may seem strange but I used Gandhi's light dismissal of Mozart as the reason for refusing his invitation, which he made later to me, to return to India again and live with him for a year.

We were, of course, often talking at different levels, yet I was reminded that most of his early influences had been Western in origin. It was Ruskin's Unto this Last, Carlyle's Heroes and Hero Worship, Tolstoy, and even Mrs. Besant and the literature of the Theosophical Society in Bayswater, which had all influenced Gandhi as a young man. But these writers only awakened a spiritual strength which was already there.

I discovered that most of his ideas concerning self-sufficiency, rural crafts and vegetarianism were derivative from Tolstoi. But the derivation is unimportant. The essential contribution Gandhi made to twentieth-century thought was his insistence on the need for a lower standard of living, in opposition to the Western notion that progress lies in an accumulation of material prosperity. He maintained that the essence of civilization consists not in the multiplication of wants but in their deliberate and voluntary renunciation.

He preached a higher standard of spiritual living and maintained that a lower level of material well-being was a necessary prerequisite. His ideas were the very antithesis of both Marx and Ford. This being so, can his importance to contemporary thought be over-estimated?

I do not think they can, and I have made this selection because

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I believe that Gandhi's teaching is of permanent value especially to the West, which is so bemused with the experiments of science that it is completely blind to the potentialities of the spirit.

Gandhi's political efforts were entirely without 'concern for the fruit'. And in the tragic Delhi Diary one reads of his self-doubts as to the value of realizing his great ambition. He had devoted his life to obtaining the independence of India. In the whole course of history there is probably no other example where such a great political accomplishment depended on the efforts of one man. And then it was not a military victory but a triumph of his own will. Yet, as the Delhi Diary reveals, if there is one thing worse than failing in one's ambitions, it is to achieve them. For to do that is often to see their value.

From the moment that Gandhi achieved independence for India, he suffered intense introspection, first appealing to one side to abandon communal strife, then pleading with the other, till he was again forced to fast. Not only did he do this; but as ever, led the nation in a practical example by touring the most dangerous areas, and going into the houses of Moslems in preference to those of Hindus.

Page after page of this tragic Diary shows his disillusionment as he witnessed the scramble for power and the way it corrupted many of his own supporters. He alone could find no cause for rejoicing at his achievement and was to the last filled with foreboding for India's future.

At the age of seventy-eight 'with nothing but agony in his heart', on 12th January 1948, he announced his intention of undertaking a great fast in an effort to quell the violent antagonism between India and Pakistan. This final act of self-sacrifice was not in vain, but caused the Government of India to pay over certain assets to Pakistan which they had been withholding pending a settlement of the Kashmir dispute. And only when the two governments pledged themselves to protect the life and property of the minorities, did Gandhi break his fast on January 18th.
But two days later, a bomb was thrown into the garden at Birla House where the Mahatma lived and held his prayer meetings. The explosion caused no loss of life. Gandhi instantly intervened with the police on the would-be assassin's behalf.

On January 26th, when India was celebrating Independence Day, Gandhi at his prayer meeting asked what was the cause of their rejoicing. 'Now that we have independence we seem to be disillusioned. At least I am, if you are not.' He then continued to speak against the violence and corruption growing around him.

He knew that the final sacrifice was inevitable. And two days later he told his secretary to bring him all his important letters. 'I must reply to them to-day, for to-morrow I may not be.' This done he went into the grounds for his prayer meeting. A Hindu youth broke from the crowd and almost knelt before the Mahatma, then fired into his stomach. Gandhi fell chanting 'Ram, Ram' (O God, O God), his hands held in an attitude of prayer.

As the bibliography shows, Mahatma Gandhi had many books published; yet he was neither a prolific writer nor a deliberate author. Many of his books consist of reports of speeches which he delivered, or collections of articles written for his weekly journal, Harijan, or were printed in the magazine, Young India.

In making this selection, I have tried to bear three things in mind: firstly, my intention to present material of permanent interest as opposed to comments on day-to-day political matters; also to show the development and to give the essence of his philosophy of satyagraha, and its basis in the religious teachings of the Gita; and thirdly, I have tried to emphasize those ideas which, though they may not seem immediately applicable to Western life, should be of considerable relevance to contemporary thought.

We live to-day in a period which has much in common with the Dark Ages -- though ours is the darkness of the neon light -- in the way that many of us are isolated though we are surrounded by means of communication; and inarticulate in spite of innumerable late-editions. In such a time, Mahatma Gandhi was an oasis of meditation in our vast and garrulous vacuity.

His insistence that spiritual value should be the basis for all action, and his belief that all culture is merely a manifestation of religious beliefs (or the lack of them), stands in complete opposition to the materialistic flood from Asia and America which, if not arrested, will certainly engulf these ruins, the remnants of Christendom. European culture arose from a spiritual impulse; and I suggest that it can ultimately only be defended by precisely the same dynamic which produced it.

Gandhi understood these essentials of philosophical strategy; that is, he could distinguish between ends and means, and was aware that it is impossible to mend a delicate wrist-watch with a sledgehammer. He knew, too, that freedom consists of discipline; and that a higher standard of living is not to be confused with the acquisition of or attachment to a greater number of mere things. He knew that the spirit can ultimately only be defended by the spirit; and that the means for our survival are not visible nor material.

I have not included his account of his campaign of satyagraha in South Africa, nor the great tour which he undertook in his last days amongst the North-west Frontier Pathans, as both of these accounts are reported elsewhere and extracts could not do justice to them. Similarly, I have not attempted to give a full picture of his life since my friend, Shri Pyarelel, is now engaged in writing a comprehensive biography.

But since so much of Gandhi's political action was in opposition to the British Raj in India, I have included some correspondence between him and the Marquis of Linlithgow, who was Viceroy of India during a crucial period in the relationship between the two countries. I believe that this correspondence not only shows the deep respect in which Gandhi was held even by the Government