GANDHI THE MAN
How one man changed himself to change the world

EKNATH EASWARAN

“Comes closer to giving some sense of how Gandhi saw his life than any other account I have read.” – Bill McKibben
GANDHI THE MAN
Gandhi in front of his law offices in Johannesburg, South Africa, 1905
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by EKNATH EASWARAN

Foreword by Michael N. Nagler

Afterword by Timothy Flinders

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Foreword
By Michael N. Nagler

My first exposure to Gandhi – or at least the first I remember – was the *Life* magazine report on his cremation. It was just days past my eleventh birthday and I was still scarred and confused by memories of the Holocaust. In the orientalizing style of the day, *Life* had chosen to emphasize the wild outpouring of grief arising from the vast crowd of onlookers, leaving me with the impression that something had happened in a strange world far from my own.

By the time I met the author of this book, when I had just become an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley, I was a conscientious objector to all forms of warfare who had naturally been deeply drawn to Gandhi from time to time – and almost as strongly put off. His strictness and his going without food – not to mention the seemingly more-than-human courage – made him seem like someone from another planet (which was more or less the lingering effect of *Life*’s presentation) and someone to whose achievements I could not possibly aspire. But as I went on listening to Easwaran speak about Gandhi an entirely different picture began to unfold. It was, to be sure, a bit paradoxical. Gandhi, it turned out, was much greater than I had realized; far, far greater. And yet – this was the really wonderful part – he was also

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more accessible. There were, Easwaran insisted, disciplines within the reach of an ordinary person like me that in the course of time could release some fraction of his colossal capacities. Gandhi liberated India from the greatest empire the world had seen—and in the process, as Albert Szent-Györgyi put it, “proved that force had lost its suggestive power”; I could at least do something to reduce the level of violence in our strife-torn, materialistic world. And as I later found out, I would not be doing it alone: the unsuspected kind of power Gandhi put in play to dispel the myth of brute force has been catching on and may be changing the tenor of human events as we speak.

Easwaran once said to me that Gandhi “came back from South Africa and quietly set about solving every problem in the modern world.” It seemed incredible at first, but sure enough, one eminent leader after another kept turning out to owe Gandhi a big debt, be it in economics, education, politics, philosophy, even diet and health. Social activists, of course, look on him as the father of nonviolence, and the greatest of them, Dr. Martin Luther King, changed his life and ours forever by taking Gandhi totally to heart. E. F. Schumacher, the author of Small Is Beautiful, would later confide to me that his whole appropriate technology movement, the ancestor of so many of today’s ecology movements, grew out of Gandhi’s spinning wheel. Lewis Mumford called him “the most important religious figure of our time,” and a tireless American peace advocate, Kirby Page, who had met almost every prominent public figure of his day, declared, “When I first wrote down my impressions, the title of my little booklet ended with a question mark: Is Mahatma Gandhi the Greatest Man of the Age? Long since that question mark has been erased from my mind.”

But the question how Gandhi achieved this greatness has remained unanswered, and that is the most important question of all. It is precisely
the question taken up in this book. For each of these achievements in politics, economics, peace, or health expresses only one part of the man, and no part of him can really be understood unless we first discover the man himself. “My life,” Gandhi tells us, “is an indivisible whole.” Gandhi’s real achievement lay not in any one field per se, but in the most important job that faces every one of us: what to make of ourselves. How did he manage, as Easwaran puts it, to “make his life such a work of art”? When we first get a glimpse of Gandhi he is a shy, hapless youth whose only distinction is a marked fear of the dark – and, as he liked to point out, his unusually large ears. How did he become a magnetic leader whom even his avowed opponents could not resist? How did this young man with the occasional sharp temper learn to sit cheerfully through all sorts of abusive criticism and emerge with his opponent treating him like a long-lost friend? How, in short, did he manage to expand the narrow personality of Mohandas K. Gandhi to become a Mahatma, an immense force for human progress which has been described by countless biographers but accounted for by none?

Here is where we need an interpreter like Easwaran. He was born in Gandhi’s India when it was still the jewel in the crown of the British Empire. His beautiful native village, like so many villages in South India, lay outside the mainstream of the tumultuous political events we regard as history. The major influence on his life was not the Gandhi who was awakening India but his maternal grandmother: a simple woman, completely unknown to history, who never lived anywhere outside her ancestral village and certainly never participated in anything like a social movement. What she planted in Easwaran’s consciousness, however, ran much deeper than the independence movement: her legacy to him was the rich spiritual tradition that had sustained India for probably five thousand years.
As Easwaran grew up, his life took him far beyond the physical and intellectual confines of his grandmother’s world. He was a promising writer and upcoming public speaker, very much under the spell of Western civilization, when he went to see Gandhi at the height of the movement for independence. But it was not his Western education and considerable intellectual training that helped Easwaran understand the living power that he witnessed that evening under the neem tree at Sevagram; it was the spiritual awareness his grandmother had implanted in his heart decades before. This enabled him to see beyond Gandhi the politician to Gandhi the man.

India is a land of wide contrasts but deep unity. The spiritual force Easwaran glimpsed in Gandhi on this visit has surfaced countless times on the Indian subcontinent, and though the human beings swept up by that force have expressed it in very different lives, the force itself is the same; the inspiring vision behind it – the vision of the unity of all life – is exactly the same. Easwaran was almost unconsciously striving for that same awareness. Gandhi helped him to strengthen and confirm that yearning, and it was again from Gandhi, whose life was an open book, that he learned how to translate the capacities that meditation releases into everyday living. Gandhi was an inveterate tinkerer; in a country where the bonds of tradition have always been strong, he was making deliberate changes in his way of living, chipping away at imperfections, right up to the day he died. His manual for all this experimentation – his “spiritual reference book,” as he called it – was the Bhagavad Gita, and that timeless classic served exactly the same purpose for Easwaran. For all their outward differences (Easwaran was never to become involved in politics, for example), both men used the Gita to guide their experiments. Thus when Easwaran interprets Gandhi’s inner and outer careers, he has the advantage of drawing on his personal experience.

In my nonviolence course at the University of California I used to
show an excellent documentary called Gandhi’s India, based on BBC interviews with people who knew Gandhi or took part in his work. Among those interviewed is a woman named Asha Devi, who was always the biggest hit with my students. When asked, “What was Gandhi like? Describe the dominant impression he made on one,” she sums up the secret of Gandhi the man in three words: “His great love.” Then, a little later, the interviewer voices a doubt one often hears in connection with Gandhi: “Don’t you think that he was a bit unrealistic, that he failed to reckon with the limits of our capacities?” I wish I could show you the joyful twinkle in her eyes as she shoots back, “There are no limits to our capacities.”

This is the authentic voice of the Gita. As human beings, Gandhi pointed out, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world outside us – as most of us are led to believe – as in being able to remake ourselves on the highest model of human achievement we know of. We were all born to discover for ourselves the ideal of nonviolence and truth, and if we can only catch fire from this ideal there is no disadvantage that flesh is heir to that can prevent us from rising to our full stature. That is what Asha Devi got from Gandhi, and that is what Easwaran has tried to convey in the pages that follow.

William Shirer, a great biographer of Gandhi, relates that a journalist friend of his was in India right after the assassination and experienced at first hand the outpouring of grief that had been my first, misleading introduction to Gandhi. In consternation he asked an Indian friend to explain what was going on, and the latter told him, “You know, the people feel that there was a mirror in the Mahatma in which they could see the greatest in themselves, and now they are afraid that mirror has been shattered.” It has not been. I hope that this beautiful book will do for you what it and my long association with its author has done for me: not only give us a glimpse of the great potential of human nature but a sense of how to unfold it in our own lives.
Gandhi the Man

“I am not a visionary. I claim to be a practical idealist.”

“I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith.”

A morning walk with Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Manubehn Gandhi in Bihar, March 1947, during communal violence.
I like to say I grew up not in British India but in Gandhi’s India, because he dominated my world like a colossus. I was a small boy when he returned after twenty years in South Africa and was hailed as Mahatma, “great soul,” in 1915. I was too young (and my little village too isolated) to have much awareness of the tragedies that impelled him into national leadership in those early years. Only when I went to college, at the age of sixteen, did I discover his weekly “viewspaper,” Young India. Gandhi was pouring his heart out in those pages, and despite the country’s widespread illiteracy, I daresay his words reached into every one of India’s villages as the paper was passed from hand to hand and read out to audiences everywhere along the way.

My college years were turbulent ones in Indian affairs. I must have been a junior on the night of December 31, 1929, when at the stroke of midnight the Indian Congress declared independence and unfurled the flag of a free India. Its motto, pure Gandhi, came from our most ancient scriptures: Satyam eva jayate, “Truth ever conquers.” Jawaharlal Nehru said later that on that night “we made a tryst with destiny.” Those were thrilling times for a village boy away at college, but they were only the beginning. Like the Americans with their Declaration of Independence, we had also made a tryst with war.
THE SALT MARCH

But this was to be a war without weapons. In March 1930, Gandhi wrote the British Viceroy that he intended to launch nonviolent resistance by marching to the sea to break a statute that made the sale and manufacture of salt a government monopoly, adding that he would accept the consequences cheerfully and that he was inviting the rest of India to do the same. That letter, the journalist Louis Fischer observed with pleasure, “was surely the strangest ever received by the head of a government.” But the Salt March provided brilliant theater. Gandhi and his small band of volunteers took fourteen days to reach the sea, stopping at every village along the way and making headlines around the world. By the time he reached the ocean the procession was several thousand strong. When he picked up a handful of sea salt from the beach and raised it as a signal to the rest of India, millions of people around the world must have watched him on the newsreels. But in India nobody needed the media. The country simply exploded in utterly nonviolent disobedience of British law.

What no one dared to expect was that in the face of police charges, beatings, arrests, and worse, the nonviolence held. Everyone knew Gandhi would drop the campaign if there was any violence on our part, no matter what the provocation. We “kept the pledge” day after day, filling the jails literally to overflowing. Many veterans of those days recall their terms in prison as the high point of their lives; Gandhi had made “suffering for Truth” a badge of honor.

I can’t describe the effect this had on me, on all of India. Obviously it was high drama, but most significant for me was the human alchemy being wrought. These were ordinary people, family, friends, school chums, acquaintances, men and women we saw daily in the marketplace or at temple, at work or school; all ages, high caste and low, educated and ignorant, cultured and crude, rich beyond calculation and unbelievably
poor. How had they suddenly become heroes and heroines, cheerfully stepping forward to be beaten with steel-tipped batons, hauled off to jail, stripped of their livelihoods, sometimes even shot? Called to be more than human, we looked around and saw that we were capable of it. Gandhi was right: the body might be frail but the spirit was boundless. We were much, much stronger than we had thought, capable of great things, not because we were great but because there was divinity in us all – even in those who swung the clubs and wielded the guns. For me, the burning question became: What was the secret of this alchemy?

**Gandhi in His Ashram**

Graduate studies took me to a university in central India very near Gandhi’s ashram, the little community he called Sevagram, “village of service.” For the first time for me he was actually within reach. One weekend I decided to visit him and perhaps find answers to my question.

I had to walk the last few miles from the train station, and the sun was low on the horizon when we arrived. A crowd had gathered outside a little thatched cottage where Gandhi had been closeted in urgent national negotiations since early morning. My heart sank. He would be tired after all that, tense and irritable, with little time for guests like me.

But when the cottage door opened, out popped a lithe brown figure of about seventy with the springy step and mischievous eyes of a teenager, laughing and joking with those around him. He was striding off for his evening walk and motioned us to come along. After a while most of the crowd fell away. He didn’t simply walk fast; he seemed to fly. With his white shawl flapping and his gawky bare legs he looked like a crane about to take off. I have always been a walker, but I had to keep breaking into a jog to keep up with him.

My list of questions was growing. This was a man in his seventies – the twilight of life by Indian standards of those days – burdened daily
with responsibility for four hundred million people. He must have lived under intense pressure fifteen hours a day, every day, for probably fifty years. Why didn’t he get burned out? How was he able to maintain this freshness? What was the source of this apparently endless vitality and good humor?

After the walk it was time for Gandhi’s prayer meeting. By this time it was dark, and hurricane lanterns had been lit all around. Gandhi sat straight with his back against a tree, and I managed to get a seat close by, where I could fix my whole heart on him. A Japanese monk opened with a Buddhist chant and then a British lady began one of Gandhi’s favorite hymns, John Henry Newman’s “Lead, Kindly Light.” Gandhi had closed his eyes in deep concentration, as if absorbed in the words.

Then his secretary, Mahadev Desai, began to recite from the Bhagavad Gita, India’s best-known scripture, which is set on a battlefield which Gandhi said represents the human heart. In the verses being recited, a warrior prince named Arjuna, who represents you and me, asks Sri Krishna, the Lord within, how one can recognize a person who is aware of God every moment of his life. And Sri Krishna replies in eighteen magnificent verses unparalleled in the spiritual literature of the world:

They live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in them, whose love for the Lord of Love has consumed every selfish desire and sense craving tormenting the heart. Not agitated by grief or hankering after pleasure, they live free from lust and fear and anger. Fettered no more by selfish attachments, they are not elated by good fortune nor depressed by bad. Such are the seers.

Sanskrit is a sonorous language, perfect for recitation. As Arjuna’s opening question reverberated through the night air, Gandhi became absolutely motionless. His absorption was so profound that he scarcely
Drafting a document at Birla House, Bombay. August 1942
seemed to breathe, as if he had been lifted out of time. Suddenly the Gita’s question – “Tell me of those who live established in wisdom” – became a living dialogue. I wasn’t just hearing the answer, I was seeing it, looking at a man who to the best of my knowledge fulfilled every condition the Gita lays down.

I had always loved the Gita for its literary beauty, and I must have read it and listened to commentaries on it many times. But seeing it illustrated by Gandhi opened its inner meaning. Not just “illustrated”: he had become those words, become a living embodiment of what they meant. “Free from selfish desires” didn’t mean indifference; it meant not trying to get anything for yourself, giving your best whatever comes without depending on anything except the Lord within. And the goal clearly wasn’t the extinction of personality. Gandhi practically defined personality. He was truly original; the rest of us seemed bland by comparison, as if living in our sleep. He spoke of making himself zero but seemed to have become instead a kind of cosmic conduit, a channel for some tremendous universal power, an “instrument of peace.”

These verses from the Gita are the key to Gandhi’s life. They describe not a political leader but a man of God, in words that show this is the very height of human expression. They tell us not what to do with our lives but what to be. And they are universal. We see essentially the same portrait in all scriptures, reflected in the lives of spiritual aspirants everywhere.

**NONVIOLENCE**

“It was only when I had learned to reduce myself to zero,” Gandhi says, “that I was able to evolve the power of satyagraha in South Africa.” Satyagraha – literally “holding on to truth” – is the name he coined for this method of fighting without violence or retaliation. Gandhi had a genius for making abstruse ideas practical, and one of the best examples
comes when he explains the basis of satyagraha. In Sanskrit the word *satya*, “truth,” is derived from *sat*, “that which is.” Truth is; untruth merely appears to be. Gandhi brought this out of the realm of doctoral dissertations and into the middle of politics. It means, he said, that evil is real only insofar as we support it. The essence of holding on to truth is to withdraw support of what is wrong. If enough people do this – if, he maintained, even one person does it from a great enough depth – evil has to collapse from lack of support.

Gandhi was never theoretical. He learned by doing. Satyagraha continued to be refined in action all his life; he was experimenting up to the day he was assassinated. But the essentials are present from the very beginning in South Africa.

First is the heartfelt conviction that a wrong situation wrongs both sides. Europeans and Indians alike were degraded by race prejudice; a lasting solution, therefore, had to relieve this burden for all involved. In spiritual terms this follows from the unity of life, which is what Gandhi’s “truth” means in practice. But it is also profoundly practical, because only a solution for everyone can actually resolve the problem and move the situation forward. More than just both sides “winning,” everyone is a little nobler, a little more human, for the outcome.

Equally essential but hardest to grasp intellectually, nonviolent action means voluntary suffering. That in fact is how it works. Gandhi discovered in South Africa that reason is ultimately impotent to change the heart. Race prejudice was already causing suffering; the task of satyagraha was to make that suffering visible. Then, sooner or later, opposition had to turn to sympathy, because deep in everyone, however hidden, is embedded an awareness of our common humanity.

Clearly there is nothing passive about this kind of resistance. “The nonviolence of my conception,” Gandhi says, “is a more active and a more real fighting than retaliation, whose very nature is to increase