

MAHATMA GANDHI (1869- 1948)

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869, in Porbandar India. Gandhi was the youngest child of his father's fourth wife, and it was his mother who taught him about the inner strength and sacrifice he would become known for (Watson 7). Belonging to the working class, the Vaisyas, Gandhi grew up in a well to do family as his father Karamchand was a successful businessman (Fischer 1950:12). While his father owned homes in Porbandar, Rajkot, and Kutiana (Fisher 9), Gandhi lived an ordinary childhood. In school he was a mediocre student, sometimes having learning troubles. As Gandhi himself once remembered "My intellect must have been sluggish, and my memory raw" (Fisher 1954:9). At the age of 13 Gandhi was married in an arranged marriage to another 13 year old named Kasturbai; a match made by their parents. Gandhi was not aware of the arrangement until all the plans were complete and later said his marriage was as if "two innocent children all unwittingly hurled themselves on the ocean of life, with only their experiences in a former incarnation to guide them" (Fischer 1954:10). Later on in life, Gandhi became a bitter enemy to child marriage because sex had obsessed him greatly in his child years (Parekh 1). After he finished school, Gandhi was faced with the decision of what career he would pursue. He thought of medicine but his father objected to the dissection of dead bodies; subsequently, he turned his attention to law. Gandhi learned about an English law course and degree that he could obtain and quickly jumped at the opportunity (Fischer 1954:12). However, elders in his caste rejected, in vain, the idea of him leaving for England because they believed the English had different morals. However, in order to gain acceptance and go, Gandhi made an oath that he would not touch meat, alcohol, or women. In September 1888, he set sail from Bombay for England (Watson 9).

In order to fit into English culture Gandhi found himself wearing a top hat, morning coat, striped trousers and spats, as well as participating in dancing and elocution lessons (Watson 9). However, it was a Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which Gandhi read while in England that shaped his inspiration in life (Fischer 1954:15). The *Bhagavad-Gita*, an exquisite poem about the science and practice of yoga, inspired Gandhi. He felt that it was a metaphor in which the battlefield was the soul and Arjuna, the protagonist, was man's higher impulses struggling against evil (Fischer 1954:16). Mahatma Gandhi could be regarded as a *karma yogi*; one who used the *Gita* to define the perfect *karma yogi*.

“He is a devotee who is jealous of none, who is a fount of mercy, who is without egotism, who is selfless, who treats alike cold and heat, happiness and misery, who is ever forgiving, who is always contented, whose resolutions are firm, who is dedicated mind and soul to god, who causes no dread, who is not afraid of others, who is free of exultation, sorrow and fear, who is pure, who is versed in action yet remains unaffected by it, who renounces all fruit, good or bad, who treats friend and foe alike, who is untouched by respect or disrespect, who is not puffed up by praise, who does not go under when people speak ill of him, who loves silence and solitude, who has a disciplined reason. Such devotion is inconsistent with the existence at the same time of strong attachments” (Fischer 1954:18).

This is how Gandhi lived and he used this ideal of desirelessness to teach others of *ahimsa* (non violence). Gandhi said that “one person, who can express *ahimsa* in life, exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality” and even though it seems that passive resistance seems very ineffective, it is really intensely active and more effective in ultimate result (Misra & Gangal 52-53). In addition to nonviolence, Gandhi also taught *satyagraha* (adherence to truth)

(Pant 5). *Satyagraha* is a combination of two words, *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (taking seizing, holding) and that one seizes hold of the truth (Hardiman 51). Gandhi knew that reason itself could not win an argument so to aid in his quest for truth he would often go through self inflicted suffering such as fasting (Hardiman 52). Gandhi believed greatly in adherence of non violence. As he once said, “truth is God and there is no way to find truth except the way of non violence” (Woodcock 7).

Before the great strides Gandhi made in his later years, his early career in London was not a success because he was too shy to voice his opinion in court. Therefore, in 1893, when he was sought after by a Muslim firm in South Africa, he was thrilled with the new job prospect and accepted the offer, sailing off to South Africa that same year (Parekh 2-3). While in South Africa he went through several experiences and challenges that would change the way he thought. Gandhi quickly learned of the racial prejudice that existed in South Africa because of the British and Dutch colonial activity. The first day of traveling to work on a railway carriage, Gandhi was beaten because he refused to give up his stage coach seat (Watson 9). In another situation where all Indians had to register and be fingerprinted, Gandhi used his method of *satyagraha*. Included among his non violent resistant acts were picketing in front of registration centers, burning cards, courting arrest and gracefully accepting punishment and suffering from police officers (Parekh 3). Gandhi realized that his methods of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* worked because it reversed the “eye for an eye” mentality which, in his opinion, just makes the whole world blind (Fischer 35).

While still married, Gandhi gave up sexual intercourse at the age of 36 from 1906 until his death (Fischer 1950:72). This practice, known as *brahmacharya*, gave him a spiritual and practical purity that would purge him from weakness. Gandhi saw *brahmacharya* as a means of making himself equal to his tasks instead of being engaged in the pleasures of daily life and the

propagation and rearing children (Watson 13). It signified control of all the senses at all times and at all places in thought, word, and deed (Fischer 1950:72).

After twenty one years in South Africa Gandhi returned to his homeland in India. After his arrival, he traveled around India with “his ears open and mouth shut” to see what the social situation of India was like at the time (Parekh 6). After four years of being back in India he became an influential national leader because of his morals, visions, manners, self confidence and courage to stand up against established leadership (Parekh 11). After several years of using his approaches of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* Gandhi was able to teach the meaning of *swaraj* or “self governance” to the Indian people by showing them what they could do (Pant 5). He believed that India needed general principles on how to govern the society, and then allow India to comprehend them in their own way (Parekh 75). Gandhi, like every Indian, wanted to be free of British domination, but also wanted more for his country. Gandhi said “I am not interested in freeing India merely from the English yoke. The movements, political freedom and social and economic freedom must go together” (Pant 16). Finally, on August 15th 1947 India gained independence from England because of the tireless work of Gandhi (Watson 57). He was a crusader for equal rights, respect for women and had removed the untouchability and thus he was given the title “Father of the Nation” (Pant 16).

The name Mahatma Gandhi is often thought to be Gandhi’s real name, however the name Mahatma is taken from Sanskrit meaning Great Soul. It is used to honor the man who gave Indians and the world self-respect and hope through his beliefs and actions. Interestingly Gandhi never personally thought that he deserved the honor of the title (Woodcock 2).

On the evening of January 30, 1948 during a prayer meeting Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead by a young Hindu by the name of Nathuram Godse who belonged to an extremist party

(Watson 61). As Gandhi fell to the ground his last words were “He Ram, He Ram” (Oh God, Oh God) (Fischer 1950:505). His life journey was now over; Gandhi had left his mark on the world. He had left home as a young, timid man and through non-violence, adherence to the truth and belief in his people, he ended it as a Mahatma.

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