

THE BIG IDEAS

Being the Change
And changing the world.

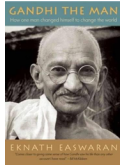
Satyagraha
= Soul-force.

Making History
By ignoring historians.

Gandhi and Sugar
And fuel for his spiritual engine.

A Call to Action
As warriors.

"My Life Is My Message"
What does yours say?



Gandhi the Man

How One Man Changed Himself to Change the World

BY EKNATH EASWARAN · NILGIRI PRESS © 2011 · 216 PAGES

“Activists and scholars have studied what they call ‘Gandhian politics’ and ‘Gandhian economics,’ but few have asked the questions which really count. How did he do it? From what did he draw his strength? How did such an ordinary little man, an ineffectual lawyer without a purpose, manage to transform himself into someone able to stand and fight alone against the greatest empire the world has known, and win—without firing a shot?”

~ Eknath Easwaran from *Gandhi the Man*

Eknath Easwaran is, as we’ve discussed, one of my absolute favorite teachers. In fact, this is our 8th Note on one of his books. (I need to check with the crew to see if that’s officially a record, but I’m pretty sure it is!)

Easwaran was an English Professor in India before coming to the United States as a Fulbright scholar where he taught at UC Berkeley. He then taught the first university-level meditation class in the US and founded the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation where he proceeded to spend decades as a spiritual teacher.

I read this book years ago but hadn’t done a Note on it yet. I recently reread it and here we are.

Let’s start with the cover of the book. It’s completely mesmerizing. Just LOOKING at Gandhi elevates your soul. Above the picture of Gandhi on the cover, we have, of course, the title: *Gandhi the Man*. And... Below that we have the sub-title that perfectly captures the essence of the book: “*How one man changed himself to change the world.*”

You know Gandhi’s iconic aphorism that we must “be the change we want to see in the world”?

Well, Easwaran tells us that the reason Gandhi had the power he had was because he worked extraordinarily (!) diligently to transform himself from a timid young man to the living embodiment of his highest ideals.

And, this book shows us HOW he did it. It’s fantastic. (Get a copy [here](#).)

It’s packed with Big Ideas. I’m excited to share some of my favorites so let’s jump straight in!

BEING THE CHANGE

“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.’”

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

~ Mahatma Gandhi

"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."

~ Mahatma Gandhi

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 who to be. And they are universal. We see essentially the same portrait in all scriptures, reflected in the lives of spiritual aspirants everywhere."

That's from the Introduction.

Quick context: Eknath grew up in Gandhi's India. As a young man, he went to visit Gandhi at his ashram. He was blown away by what he saw.

Gandhi was the living embodiment of the spiritual ideals captured in the [Bhagavad Gita](#)—which Gandhi called his "spiritual handbook" and which Eknath himself later translated. (I HIGHLY recommend [his translation and commentary](#) by the way.)

The verses that Gandhi so powerfully personified?

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.

That's Part 1 of this Idea.

For Part 2, let's chat about the fact that, by "reducing himself to zero," Gandhi's personality shown even MORE brightly than before. As Eknath says, it was as if he was the only one who was radiantly alive and awake—"a kind of cosmic conduit, a channel for some tremendous universal power, an 'instrument of peace.'"

That beautiful description reminds me of a few things.

First, Joseph Campbell who tells us: "There's nothing you can do that's more important than being fulfilled. You become a sign, you become a signal, transparent to transcendence; in this way, you will find, live, and become a realization of your own personal myth."

"Transparent to transcendence." <- THAT is what Eknath witnessed in Gandhi. And, what Gandhi (and all other great spiritual teachers) challenges us to achieve as well.

And... Any time I start thinking about the balance of cosmic power and individual personality, this passage from Ken Wilber pops into my head.

"The word we translate as 'nonviolence' is a Sanskrit word central in Buddhism as well: ahimsa, the complete absence of violence in word and even thought as well as action. This sounds negative, just as 'nonviolence' sounds passive. But like the English word 'flawless,' ahimsa denotes perfection. Ahimsa is unconditional love; satyagraha is love in action."

~ Eknath Easwaran

I've shared it many times before and we're going to look at it again. Ken says: "But 'egoless' does not mean 'less than personal'; it means 'more than personal.' Not personal minus, but personal plus—all the normal qualities, plus some transpersonal ones. Think of the great yogis, saints, and sages—from Moses to Christ to Padmasambhava. They were not feeble-mannered milquetoasts, but fierce movers and shakers—from bullwhips in the Temple to subduing entire countries. They rattled the world on its own terms, not in some pie-in-the-sky piety; many of them instigated massive social revolutions that have continued for thousands of years. And they did so, not because they avoided the physical, emotional, and mental dimensions of humanness, and the ego that is their vehicle, but because they engaged them with a drive and intensity that shook the world to its very foundations.

The great yogis, saints, and sages accomplished so much precisely because they were not timid little toadies but great big egos, plugged into the dynamic Ground and Goal of the Kosmos itself, plugged into their own higher Self, alive to the pure Atman (the pure I-I), that is one with Brahman; they opened their mouths and the world trembled, fell to its knees, and confronted its radiant God... There is certainly a type of truth to the notion of transcending ego: it doesn't mean destroy the ego, it means plug it into something bigger... Put bluntly, the ego is not an obstruction to Spirit, but a radiant manifestation of Spirit.

The integral sage, the nondual sage, is here to show us otherwise. Known generally as 'Tantric,' these sages insist on transcending life by living it. They insist on finding release by engagement, finding nirvana in the midst of samsara, finding total liberation by complete immersion."

Sounds a lot like Eknath's description of Gandhi, eh?

Here's to purifying ourselves so we can become transparent to the transcendent and give the world all we've got.

SATYAGRAHA = SOUL-FORCE

"Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will."

~ Mahatma Gandhi

"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."

This book is, of course, about Gandhi the man.

Gandhi the man was born Mohandes Karamchand Gandhi on October 2nd, 1869. He was a timid, shy boy. He got married at age thirteen, when he was still afraid of the dark.

At 18, shortly after his first son was born, he sailed from Bombay to London to study law. He was so bad at it that the other lawyers joking called him the "briefless barrister." In fact, the first time he represented someone in court, he was so afraid that he literally couldn't speak and was forced to hand the case over to another attorney as he left the court room in shame.

Long story a little shorter... Gandhi wound up in South Africa in 1893. A week after arriving there he was thrown off of the train after he refused to give up his first-class ticket and move to the third-class cars reserved for Indians.

That experience changed his life.

In essence, he stopped working for himself and started working for the Indian community in South Africa. In that devotion to selfless service (combined with relentless spiritual discipline), he found the power that would make him Mahatma (or "great soul") Gandhi on his return to India in 1915.

The cornerstone of Gandhi's revolutionary approach to revolutionary action (that eventually led to the independence of India) was satyagraha.

As Eknath tells us, this word Gandhi coined literally means "holding on to truth."

Eknath tells us that the word also referred to "soul-force."

The equation?

Reduce yourself to zero.

Let the power of loving truth permeate your every action.

Enter: The palpable, world-changing soul-force of the Mahatma.

MAKING HISTORY

"It was one of the most radical discoveries he was to make in a lifetime of experimentation: in order to transform others, you first have to transform yourself."

~ Eknath Easwaran

"Gandhi tested satyagraha in South Africa for seven years and showed that it worked in a foreign land against a strong and hostile government. He returned to India a seasoned veteran of nonviolent resistance, certain that he could free India politically from British domination without war, without violence, if the Indian people would accept his leadership and abide completely by the nonviolent conditions he placed before them.

'Select your purpose,' he challenged, 'selfless, without any thought of personal pleasure or personal profit, and then use selfless means to attain your goal. Do not resort to violence even if it seems at first to promise success; it can only contradict your purpose. Use the means of love and respect even if the result seems far off or uncertain. Then throw yourself heart and soul into the campaign, counting no price too high for working for the welfare of those around you, and every reverse, every defeat, will send you deeper into your own personal resource. Violence can never bring an end to violence; all it can do is provoke more violence. But if we can adhere to complete nonviolence in thought, word, and deed, India's freedom is assured.'

The historian J.B. Kripalani, who became one of Gandhi's closest co-workers, has said that the first time he heard Gandhi talk this way he was so shocked that he went up to him and told him point-blank: 'Mr. Gandhi, you may know all about the Bible or the Bhagavad Gita, but you know nothing at all about history. Never has a nation been able to free itself without violence.'

Gandhi smiled. 'You know nothing about history,' he corrected gently. 'The first thing you have to learn about history is that because something has not taken place in the past, that does not mean it cannot take place in the future.'"

Free India from the domination of the British Empire? THE most powerful empire in history? Without violence?

The historian says that's not possible.

The Mahatma teaches him history's first rule. Just because something hasn't taken place in the past doesn't mean it can't happen in the future.

That's a wise perspective for each of us to bear in mind as we engage in our personal satyagraha's, eh?

I'm reminded of similar wisdom—albeit on a much more mundane, personal plane—from [The Achievement Habit](#) by Bernard Roth.

He tells us: "Statistics show you trends, they can't predict your life.

Likewise, consider that the odds have always been against greatness. If one were to decide on a career path just by the odds of financial success, we would have no movie stars, authors, poets, or musicians. The odds of any one person becoming a professional, self-supporting musician are very low—and yet turn on the radio and you hear hundreds of them. The odds were against the Beatles, Elvis, and the Grateful Dead, too. They could have been 'scientific' about the whole thing and chosen more reasonable career paths, and what a loss for the world that would have been!

If you succeed, the odds are the meaningless. Any path may have a 2 percent success rate, yet if you're in that 2 percent, there's a 100 percent chance of success for you. The long shots are often the most rewarding."

So... Back to you.

What is it you want to do with this one precious life of yours?

"One man cannot do right on one department of life whilst he is occupied in doing wrong in any other department. Life is one indivisible whole."

~ Mahatma Gandhi

As Gandhi would say: *“Select your purpose ... selfless, without any thought of personal pleasure or personal profit, and then use selfless means to attain your goal.”*

GANDHI AND SUGAR AND FUEL FOR HIS ENGINE

“Strength of numbers is the delight of the timid. The valiant in spirit glory in fighting alone.”
~ Mahatma Gandhi

“During the thirties a woman came to Sevagram asking Gandhi to get her little boy to stop eating sugar; it was doing him harm. Gandhi gave a cryptic reply: ‘Please come back next week.’

The woman left puzzled but returned a week later, dutifully following the Mahatma’s instructions. ‘Please don’t eat sugar,’ Gandhi told the young fellow when he saw him. ‘It is not good for you.’ Then he joked with the boy for awhile, gave him a hug, and sent him on his way. But the mother, unable to contain her curiosity, lingered behind to ask, ‘Bapu, why didn’t you say this last week when we came? Why did you make us come back again?’

Gandhi smiled. ‘Last week,’ he said to her, ‘I too was eating sugar.’”

I love everything about that story.

From the fact that Gandhi couldn’t tell someone else to do something *he* wasn’t doing to the fact that he specifically encouraged the kid to stop eating sugar. :)

I hereby channel my inner Gandhi and say to you (if you’d like to receive the wisdom): “Please don’t eat sugar. It is not good for you.”

jokes *hug*

That is all.

Well, that and this.

Here’s some more wisdom on Gandhi’s relationship to food: *“Dinner at Sevagram, for the uninitiated, was often full of surprises. Gandhi had little interest for gourmet fare; for him the body was an instrument of service, and he gave it food the same way he would give an engine gas. ‘Eat only what you need,’ he advised, ‘only when you are hungry, and only when you have done at least a little work for others.’”*

A CALL TO ACTION

“My study of English law came to my help . . . I understood the Gita teaching of non-possession to mean that those who desired salvation should act like a trustee who, though having control over great possessions, regards not an iota of it as his own.”
~ Mahatma Gandhi

“The Gita gives detailed instructions for crossing the sea of life. The battlefield where the narrative is set represents the individual human heart, where the forces of light and darkness, love and separateness, war incessantly for mastery over our thought and actions. In the dialogue which unfolds, Arjuna, the warrior prince who represents every man or woman, seeks to learn the art of living from Sri Krishna, the Lord of Love, who is the outward manifestation of Arjuna’s deepest self. Arjuna is a man of action. He is not interested in metaphysics or airy theories; he wants to know how to make every moment of his life count, free from anxiety and fear. His questions are practical inquiries into the problems of living, and Sri Krishna’s answers are simple and to the point. We are born to fight, he tells Arjuna; there is no choice in the matter. Our every desire must bring us into conflict. But we can choose how and whom we will fight. We can turn our anger against others, or we can turn it against what is selfish and angry in ourselves. We can use our hands to strike at others or to wipe tears away. It is a call to action, and that is why Sri Krishna describes the heroes and heroines of the Gita’s ‘way of love’ in the language not of sentiment but of war.”

The Bhagavad Gita.

As we’ve discussed, this was Gandhi’s primary spiritual handbook (along with the Bible and Koran, btw). (And, again: I HIGHLY recommend [Easwaran’s translation and commentary](#).)

The focus of this classic manual on the art of living?

"The goal ever recedes from us. The greater the progress the greater the recognition of our unworthiness. Satisfaction lies in the effort, not in the attainment. Full effort is full victory."

~ Mahatma Gandhi

A warrior on the battlefield of life receiving counsel from his highest self as he faces the forces of light and dark. The great manual on the "way of love" is not written in the language of *sentiment* but of WAR. The heroes and heroines are called to action. As are we. Every day of our lives.

P.S. Any time I think of the Gita and its emphasis on that battle, I think of Socrates and his parallel wisdom. He tells us: *"I desire only to know the truth, and to live as well as I can... And, to the utmost of my power, I exhort all other men to do the same... I exhort you also to take part in the great combat, which is the combat of life, and greater than every other earthly conflict."*

"MY LIFE IS MY MESSAGE"

"A human being is an immense spiritual force barely contained in a physical form. When all his hopes, all his desires, all his drive, all his will fuse together and become one, this force is released even in his own lifetime, and not even the death of his body can imprison it again. Gandhi made himself the force of nonviolence. He is a force which cannot die, which awakens again wherever a person or a community or a nation turns to nonviolence with all its strength and all its will.

Once, while Gandhi's train was pulling slowly out of the station, a reporter ran up to him and asked him breathlessly for a message to take back to his people. Gandhi's reply was a hurried line scrawled on a scrap of paper: 'My life is my message.' It is a message which does not require the vast stage of world politics, but can be put into practice here and now, in the midst of daily life."

"My life is my message."

Easwaran wrote a whole book on that theme called [Your Life Is Your Message](#).

Which kinda begs the question: What message is YOUR life giving to the world?

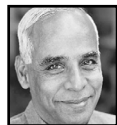
Whenever I ponder that question, Rumi comes to mind. The great poet once said: *"He is a letter to everyone. You open it. It says, 'Live!'"*

B

Brian Johnson,
Lover of Wisdom

About the Author of "Gandhi the Man"

EKNATH EASWARAN



Eknath Easwaran (1910-1999) is respected around the world as one of the twentieth century's great spiritual teachers and an authentic guide to timeless wisdom. Although he did not travel or seek large audiences, his books on meditation, spiritual living, and the classics of world mysticism have been translated into twenty-six languages. More than 1.5 million copies of Easwaran's books are in print.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.

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