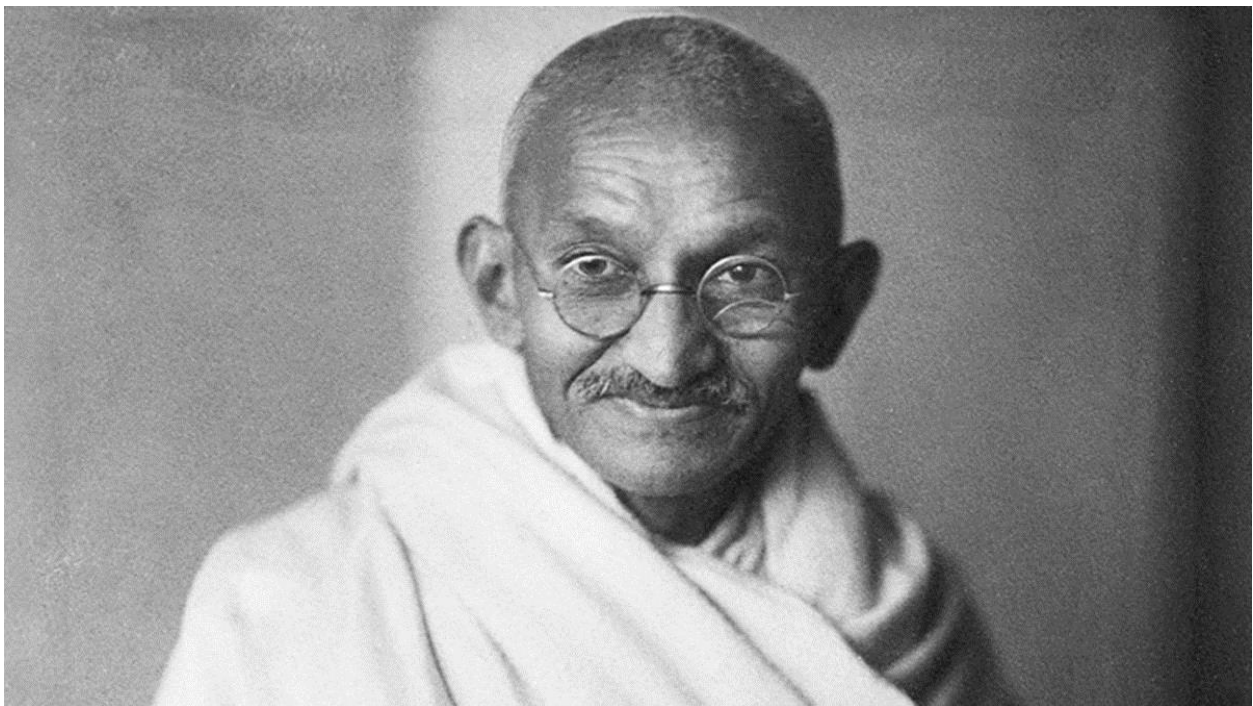


The 11 vows of Gandhiji

Overview

The information in this document was extracted from the Gandhi Research Foundation and is meant for academic, non-commercial purposes. This document is to be treated as the official 11 vows of Gandhiji for the duration of the Gandhi Memorial Debate 2018.

To learn more about the Gandhi Research Foundation as well as the 11 vows of Gandhiji, please visit <http://www.gandhifoundation.net>.



The 11 vows

Gandhiji first declared his 11 vows when he established his first Ashram in India, Kochrab Ashram, in 1915. Only those were admitted as inmates to the ashram, who were ready to take these vows.

The 11 vows were like 11 steps to higher awareness, higher realisation and higher attainment. Gandhiji did not give any order of preference to the vows, so they are presented in a loose configuration here: Satya or Truth, Ahimsa or nonviolence, Brahmacharya or celibacy, Asteya or nonstealing, Asangraha or nonpossession, Sharir Shram or bread labour, Aswada or control of palate, Bhayavarjana or fearlessness, Sarva Dharma Sambhav or religious equality, Swadeshi or use of local products, and Sparsh Bhavana or removal of untouchability.

The 11 vows of Gandhiji

1 Satya (truth)

This virtue was dearest to Gandhiji's heart. As his realisation about the allpervading and everomnipotent dimension of Truth matured, it became his dominant life force and guiding principle.

Gandhiji equated such profound truth with God. He started seeking Truth as a seeker strives to find his God. For him, truth was indeed God, and truthfulness was his religion. In his book *Yerawada Mandir*, he has written, "Truth should be Truth in thought, Truth in speech, and Truth in action. To the man who has realised this Truth in its fullness, nothing else remains to be known, because all knowledge is necessarily included in it. What is not included in it, is not truth and so not true knowledge".

According to Gandhiji, truth was not a passive but a very active virtue, which was to be practiced not only in speech and action, but in thought also. In fact, all speech and action emanates from thought, so it was paramount to be truthful in thought first and foremost.

2 Ahimsa (nonviolence)

This was the only weapon which Gandhiji ever resorted to, in all his struggles and movements. Nonviolence was his only response to all violent and oppressive actions he faced in his life. In doing so, he illustrated that blood can be washed away only with water, not with blood. He demonstrated to an unbelieving world the potency of active nonviolence, that not raising a finger against a pointed pistol, and not hurling even a stone at a cannonman required far more courage than giving tit for tat. All the might and all the firepower of the British ultimately proved to be petty against the gushing force of nonviolence.

Nonviolence is more powerful than violence because it exists at a higher and superior level than its counterpart. Compared to the almostsublime force of nonviolence derived from inner strength and conviction, violence is merely prosaic and physical. One can kill a man, but not his spirit. Nonviolence's womb is the spirit, and hence violence cannot reach or harm its core.

There is another dimension to the power of nonviolence. While violence is lifetaking, nonviolence is lifegiving. It is born out of regenerative sentiments like love, compassion, brotherhood, amity, and most importantly, nonvengeance. It is this remarkable characteristic of nonviolence that made Gandhiji so humble, gentle and full of humility even in success. His worst critics never perceived him as an enemy. He was a nonviolent man, never a threat to anybody, and hence never anybody's enemy.

The 11 vows of Gandhiji

3 Brahmacharya (celibacy)

Celibacy was an integral part of the code of conduct of Gandhiji's ashram life. He was of the firm opinion that the full potential of celibacy could not be harnessed unless its observance was not extended to all the five sensory pleasures. They were interlinked and interlocked, and in order to put into practice true celibacy, it was necessary to be restrained in all the five types of indulgences. Certain types of foods aroused carnal desire, and hence restraint of palate was needed to observe unflinching celibacy. Likewise, to hear provocative dialogues or to see provocative visual impressions was detrimental to practice celibacy.

Gandhiji saw the need for celibacy in every individual's life who wanted to reach higher levels of attainment, whatever his field of activity may be. Indulgence was a major outlet of one's vital physical and spiritual energies. Through observance of celibacy, one buffers these energies for constructive use in his chosen pursuit. Hence, celibacy becomes not an inhibitor but a facilitator of achieving avowed goals.

It is with this firm conviction that Gandhiji endorsed celibacy as a chosen style of life for students, so that their energies can be canalised to the pursuit of knowledge seeking and learning processes.

4 Asteya (nonstealing)

Gandhiji had an expanded vision of this virtue. Asteya was not a limited practice of not stealing as a direct action. The indirect and subtle ways of stealing, like lying stealing of truthfulness, cheating stealing others' rights, conspiring stealing of others' legacy, waging of war stealing of others' territories, these were also forms of stealing, according to Gandhiji.

Mankind's greed and craving for artificial needs are also stealing, as per Gandhiji's dictum. When we compound our needs and wants, we actually steal from others' right to basic requirements. A wealthy man residing in a mansion steals a poor man's land for his hut. In due consideration of this idea, Gandhiji has written in Yerawada Mandir, "One who follows the observance of Nonstealing will bring about a progressive reduction of his own wants. Much of the distressing poverty in this world has risen out of the breaches of the principle of Nonstealing".

5 Aparigraha (nonpossession):

The sentiment of nonpossession has several dimensions in Gandhiji's perception. The term's overriding connotation is that one does not hoard, one does not store for future what one does not need today. In this way, one helps to meet the present need of countless lesser privileged people who can barely eat one square meal a day. By hoarding, we are essentially snatching away this square meal of the poor.

The 11 vows of Gandhiji

Secondly, lesser possessions lead to lesser aspirations and wants. And the lesser one wants, the better off one is, because then one is not in a stage of greed for what one does not have but in a stage of contentment with whatever one has.

The ultimate stage of nonpossession is no possession. In this state, there are no material possessions, which lead to cultivating detachment. When one doesn't possess any worldly possessions, there is nothing for him that ties him down to worldly affairs. This clears his path of spiritual pursuits. Only by relinquishing the worldly does one get the sublime.

6 Sharirshrama (Bread Labour):

Gandhiji has emphasized the importance of physical labour in many of his ideals. In Nayi Talim, he related labour to coordinated and balanced personality development. Herein, he emphasises the inevitability of manual work in earning one's living "Earn thy labour by the sweat of the brow", the saying from Bible, is the guiding principle herein. Given the known belief of Gandhiji that intellectual activity is interrelated with physical activity, he could not perceive any one activity in isolation. Hence, in earning one's living, one had to employ both the activities in equal measure.

Secondly, the urge not to earn more than necessary, and to devote some amount of physical activity towards selfless social cause, is intrinsic to the notion of bread labour. By not earning more than required, the resources are distributed more equitably. And by devoting some amount of labour by able-bodied people towards the society, the lesser-abled or the disabled are also benefited. In this manner, the concept of bread labour benefits both the monetarily as well as physically underprivileged.

7 Aswada (Control of the Palate)

Food is energy for body, and what is this body? A machine and a means to serve the self and the selfless purposes. Overenergising of the body in any form will lead to its abuse, and when the body is abused, the abuse of mind and soul cannot be far away.

Gandhiji thus conceived the negative impact of wrong dietary habits. He stressed on the nutritive aspects of food rather than those that just titillate the taste buds. In fact, he advocated total avoidance of spicy, over nutritious food that would be counterproductive to the very aim of utilising the body for noble purposes. We become less than animals and brutes by eating wrong foods in the wrong way; that is what Gandhiji felt fervently.

Control of palate is also intimately related with observance of celibacy and overall restraint.

The 11 vows of Gandhiji

8 Sarvatra Bhayavarjana (Fearlessness)

As in the case of each of these vows, fearlessness is projected as a multidimensional feature. On one hand, Gandhiji opines that fearlessness in all walks of life; from fear of ghosts, to fear of enemy, to fear of poverty, should be eradicated. On the other hand, he also cautions that fearlessness must not result in brashness, arrogance or inconsiderate attitude towards the less fearless.

9 Sarva Dharma Samantva (Equality of the religions)

Gandhiji visualised the different faiths as different rivers that ultimately converged with one ocean. But, just as the waters of all the rivers are the same, so is the basic substance of all the religions. The tenets of all religions have similar ethos and essence. It was this ethos that Gandhiji emphasised upon, without dwelling in the intricacies of individual preachings. He himself having read the philosophies of all major religions, Gandhiji firmly believed that sectarian and partisan divides between religions were the nefarious creation of vested, ignorant or hardline sections present in all religious institutions, and dismissed their narrow views as deterrents to true values of their respective faiths.

Gandhiji's belief of ideal religion thus points towards a universal belief system that converges all the great religious philosophies, rather than the structured, organised religious institutions. This, he advocated even while respecting the individual preachings of all religions.

True religious equanimity and tolerance would be born from the seeds of such a broad, incorporative and inclusive perspective of religion, and a compassionate understanding of it.

10 Swadeshi (Use Locally Made Goods)

Swadeshi, in the literal sense, means homemade, or domestically produced. Gandhiji strongly advocated use of swadeshi products and services in line with his idea of boosting domestic productivity with domestic demand. He has said in the periodical Young India dated April 20, 1919, that his foremost loyalty and sense of alliance is with his nextdoor neighbour, and this, he would bear in mind at all times. He would never think of adopting anything produced by faraway lands, no matter how fine or superior in quality, at the cost of his neighbour's produce, may it be wheat or wool. It is only in this manner that he would serve his neighbour rightly and dutifully, by helping him sustain a life of dignified sustenance.

Patronising a faraway friend at the expense of the neighbouring brethren was a moral and ethical sin, Gandhiji felt.

The 11 vows of Gandhiji

11 Sparshbhavna (Untouchability)

Gandhiji was so repelled with the practice of untouchability in India that he condemned it in strong words in December 1920 issue of Young India, "I consider untouchability to be a heinous crime against humanity. It is not a sign of self-restraint, but an arrogant assumption of superiority".

Untouchability is a sectarian social custom of India, in which the upper caste considered themselves polluted, blemished, demeaned and declassified if they came in slightest physical contact with the lowest caste, the Hairjans. If this happened, they would have to purify their body, mind and soul through special rituals. The barbaric practice is deep-rooted in the Indian social and caste system, and various social reformers including Gandhiji have worked tirelessly to abolish it.

Removal of untouchability was one of the priorities of Gandhiji's social reforms agenda. He considered it a curse which had polarised the Indian society. He likened the abolishment of this custom with spreading love, compassion and equality among all.