



On Non-Possession

Mohandas K. Gandhi

When I found myself drawn into the political coil, I asked myself what was necessary for me in order to remain absolutely untouched by immorality, by untruth, by what is known as political gain....It was a difficult struggle in the beginning and it was a wrestle with my wife and—as I can vividly recall—with my children also. But be that as it may, I came definitely to the conclusion that, if I had to serve the people in whose midst my life was cast and of whose difficulties I was a witness from day to day, I must discard all wealth, all possessions....

I cannot tell you with truth that, when this belief came to me, I discarded everything immediately. I must confess to you that progress at first was slow. And now, as I recall those days of struggle, I remember it was also painful in the beginning. But, as days went by, I saw that I had thrown overboard many other things which I used to consider mine, and a time came when it became a matter of positive joy to give up those things. And one after another, then, by almost geometric progression, the things slipped away from me.

And, as I am describing my experiences, I can say a great burden fell off my shoulders, and I felt that I could now walk with ease and do my work also in the service of my fellow-men with great comfort and still greater joy. The possession of anything then became a troublesome thing and a burden.

Exploring the cause of that joy, I found that, if I kept anything as my own, I had to defend it against the whole world. I found also that there were many people who did not have the thing, although they wanted it; and I would have to seek police assistance also if hungry, famine-stricken people, finding me in a lonely place, wanted not merely to divide the thing with me but to dispossess me. And I said to myself, if they want it and would take it, they do so not from any malicious motive, but they would do it because theirs was a greater need than mine.

Non-possession is allied to non-stealing. A thing not originally stolen must nevertheless be classified as stolen property, if we possess it without needing it. Possession implies provision for the future. A seeker after the truth, a follower of the law of love, cannot hold anything against tomorrow. God never stores for the morrow; he never creates more than what is strictly needed for the moment. If therefore we repose faith in his providence, we should rest assured that he will give us every day our daily bread, meaning everything that we require. Saints and devotees who have lived in such a faith have always derived a justification for it from their experience.

Our ignorance or neglect of the divine law, which gives to a man from day to day his daily bread and no more, has given rise to inequalities with all the miseries attendant upon them. The rich have a superfluous store of things which they do not need, and which are therefore neglected and wasted, while millions are starved to death for want of sustenance. If each retained possession only of what he needed, no one would be in want, and all would

live in contentment. As it is, the rich are discontented no less than the poor. The poor man would fain become a millionaire, and the millionaire a multimillionaire. The rich should take the initiative in dispossession with a view to a universal diffusion of the spirit of contentment. If only they keep their own property within moderate limits, the starving will be easily fed, and will learn the lesson of contentment along with the rich.

Perfect fulfillment of the ideal of non-possession requires that man should, like the birds, have no roof over his head, no clothing, and no stock of food for the morrow. He will indeed need his daily bread, but it will be God's business, and not his, to provide it. Only the fewest possible, if any at all, can reach this ideal. We ordinary seekers may not be repelled by the seeming impossibility. But we must keep the ideal constantly in view, and in the light thereof, critically examine our possessions and try to reduce them. Civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants. This alone promotes real happiness and contentment, and increases the capacity for service. Judging by this criterion, we find that in the ashram we possess many things, the necessity for which cannot be proved, and we thus tempt our neighbors to thieve.

From the standpoint of pure truth, the body too is a possession. It has been truly said that desire for enjoyment creates bodies for the soul. When this desire vanishes, there remains no further need for the body, and man is free from the vicious cycle of births and deaths. The soul is omnipresent; why should she care to be confined within the cagelike body, or do evil and even kill for the sake of that cage? We thus arrive at the ideal of total renunciation, and learn to use the body for the purposes of service so long as it exists, so much so that service, and not bread, becomes with us the stuff of life. We eat and drink, sleep and wake, for service alone. Such an attitude of mind brings us real happiness, and the beatific vision in the fullness of time.

Mohandas K. Gandhi. "Letter from Yeravada Mandir to the Satyagraha Ashram."