

Value of Education and  
the Improvement of the Character of the Educated

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### Abstract

In a time of British rule Mahatma Gandhi represented a combination of the balance of Eastern Philosophy and Western education necessary to lead a nationalist movement within India.

Growing up in India Gandhi was surrounded by a mixture of Indian, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu philosophies that would drive his passion for independence. It is his understanding of Western customs and British law that allowed him to understand and resist against the system that subjected India. While others were also exposed to both worlds, Gandhi took it upon himself to use his knowledge and be the change he wished to see in the world.

The real difficulty is that people have no idea of what education truly is. We assess the value of education in the same manner as we assess the value of land or of shares in the stock-exchange market. We want to provide only such education as would enable the student to earn more. We hardly give any thought to the improvement of the character of the educated. The girls, we say, do not have to earn; so why should they be educated? As long as such ideas persist there is no hope of our ever knowing the true value of education.

(M. K. Gandhi True Education on the NCTE site)

## Value of Education and the Improvement of the Character of the Educated

Gandhi is a clear example of the importance of character development in education and the fault of western views on education. Gandhi's education demonstrates how education is more than just a means to a financial gain. Education, when done properly, should be the combination of teaching hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills being those that can be measures such as reading, writing, and typing. Soft skills being the personal attributes that allows an individual to interact with others. Even the use of the term “soft skills” is belittling to the importance of character development in education. “Soft” inferring to a weaker, less important, skill set. Gandhi is the perfect example to counter such an idea of education, demonstrating the importance of character.

Education is not limited to that of which we learn in a classroom. It is the collective result of our experiences, the examples we model ourselves after, and our studies. Gandhi's education is the culmination of his time spent with his mother, the example his father set for him, his childhood experiences, the results of his choices, his self-study of texts of all religions, and his formal education in India and London. It was the result of these collective experiences in conjunction with his firsthand experience with racial-discrimination that causes him to act against the injustice around him. The value in his education does not lie in his academic standing but how he used his knowledge to lead India in its independence.

Born in October 1869 in Porbander, Gandhi Karamchand was the fourth child of Putlibai and Karamchand, or Kaba<sup>1</sup>. Gandhi's education began in his home with his mothers' lessons and her example. Much of who Gandhi would one day become is due to this early upbringing, a

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<sup>1</sup> Ashe, 1-3

mother being the first influence and first teacher to her children<sup>2</sup>. Putlibai raised Gandhi on religious and philosophical texts in the family's beliefs as Vaishnavites, worshippers of Vishnu as Supreme God, with an infusion of Islamic and Jain ideals into Hinduism. She stressed strict attitudes on sex, alcohol, tobacco, temple worship, and fasting with an emphasis on positivity and the importance of truth. She was a well-spoken woman who was welcome to the princes' courts for discussion.<sup>3</sup>

Putlibai's guidance and Gandhi's experience with wisdom literature led to his strict self-discipline and devotion. Gandhi would continue to read book 2 lines 55-65 of the Bhagavad-Gita daily into his adulthood, constantly reminding himself of its words and contemplating their meaning. The film **Gandhi** shows how he held to his fasts both when the resistance became violent and when the Muslims and Hindus fought each other in the streets<sup>4</sup>. Gandhi's fasts are a more extreme action reflecting a story of Putlibai. In the story she is stressing the importance of completing what one begins to her sons. Their mother jokes that she will not eat on a rainy day until God shows her the sun. Gandhi and his brothers would wait outside for sunlight then rush in to tell her to eat when it peaked through the clouds, but by the time she came out to the boys the sun would be gone. As such she would say that God did not want her to eat that day<sup>5</sup>. Even in a lighthearted manner she wished to express the importance of maintaining one's word through positive action. In Gandhi's case, others would have been tempted to act in retribution or be swept into the excitement of India's revolution, but Gandhi remained true to his education.

While his mother was his first guide his father selected Gandhi for the family premiership in his youth. As Premier of Porbander, Rajkot, and Wankaner, Kaba would defend his chief

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<sup>2</sup> Amritanandamayi

<sup>3</sup> Ashe, 4-6

<sup>4</sup> Attenborough, *Gandhi*

<sup>5</sup> Ashe, 5

against the overbearing British and appeared to be above bribery<sup>6</sup>. It is with Kaba that Gandhi sees his first example of how an Indian man could work within the British political world. Kaba used his position to support his family while maintaining the balance between his British superiors and Indian constituents. Kaba would give to charity and spend his finances, instead of saving his money, claiming he did not want his children to be dependent on wealth. Being in such a position Kaba's work brought Jains, Quakers, Christians and other missionaries to his home. Their home was a three-story house that had been in the family for five generations and displayed the wear of war. It is due to his father's involvement in politics, and his intention to groom Gandhi for his position, that Gandhi was exposed to a wide variety of individuals and law.<sup>7</sup>

As a child, Gandhi would not retaliate when he was confronted in school, instead he chose to not fight back, an example of his mother's teachings and precursor to his future philosophy. When Gandhi was married at age 13, he was not fully aware of what was happening until the wedding was in procession. His father had been out of town before the wedding and rushed to attend, suffering an accident along the way. Though he was injured, Kaba attended the wedding sitting in his place bandaged and hurt. In this way Kaba was an example to young Gandhi of Hindu values, in that one must act in accordance to their place regardless of the outcome. Later in his life, Gandhi would realize that his place was to unite the people of India in resistance against the British, regardless of his own safety. It was soon after that he befriended a young Muslim child named Sheikh Mehtab who would challenge him academically and morally. Sheikh ate meat and claimed that the meat made him stronger than Gandhi, who was a

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<sup>6</sup> Ashe, 3

<sup>7</sup> Ashe, 4

vegetarian. The students would also tell rumors of instructors eating meat as a sign of patriotism.

The school boys would recite a poem by Narmad, a Gujarati poet:

Behold the Mighty Englishman,

He Rules the Indian small,

Because being a meat eater

He is five cubits tall

This led to Gandhi eating lamb at the river with his friend, but he could not continue the practice due to his feeling of guilt of betraying and lying to his parents. Even as a young child Gandhi's desire to keep true to himself overshadowed his desire to be a "Proper British Gentleman", a comment he would later make about his children in the film.<sup>8</sup> Gandhi was able to understand why his friend and the other boys ate meat, but also understood that he had to be true to his upbringing and beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

Gandhi grew up with a patriotic loyalty to the British but a need to protect his own people, a contradiction that could not withstand. In the film **Gandhi**, Gandhi tries to maintain these two ideals into adulthood, referring to his children as "Proper English Gentlemen"<sup>10</sup>. The exposure to different faiths led him to study comparative religion in his late teens, especially after the loss of his father. Regardless of Kaba's ability to provide a decent education for Gandhi, he was more interested in gardening and taking walks. He was an average student, who studied mathematics, English, cricket, tennis, and music. While attending High School, Gandhi watched a play of King Harischandra and would reenact the trials. The play focuses on the King who refuses to lie even after he loses his crown, his family, and becomes an untouchable. Young

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<sup>8</sup> Attenborough, *Gandhi*

<sup>9</sup> Ashe, 4-13

<sup>10</sup> Attenborough, *Gandhi*

Gandhi would reenact the life of a man who refused to give up on his values no matter the physical pains he was subjected to. This simple childhood act was foreshadowing of his life to come. In particular, the moment in the film when Gandhi exclaims, “They may torture my body, break my bones, even kill me, then they will have my dead body, not my obedience”<sup>11</sup>. It was not until after he was married, and his father passed that Gandhi began focusing more on his formal education. He was sent to London to study law so that he may take his father’s place as the premiership of Porbandar. <sup>12</sup>

In London, Gandhi attempted to reconcile his London life with his Hindu values, but found it difficult. Instead, he moved out of his host family’s home, concentrated more on his studies, and befriended a group of writers who frequented vegetarian restaurants. It is with these authors that he debated religion, philosophy, sex, law, and other topics. In doing so he read an English translation of the Bhagavad-Gita, thus opening his eyes to the westerners’ understanding of India and Hindu culture. Returning home Gandhi was given a first-class train ticket to Pretoria, setting into motion the accumulation of his knowledge.<sup>13</sup> In the film we see a recreation of the moment when Gandhi is confronted for being a “colored” man in a first-class seat<sup>14</sup>. It is from this point on that Gandhi begins using his knowledge of British law and the Western understanding of Indians to his advantage.

He acts in accordance to his beliefs, those learned from his mother, his father's example, and his experiences as a youth growing up in India. He uses passive activism, keeping in accordance of the law while also doing what he must do in accordance with his place, just as his father did. He combines the Hindu need to take action with the Janis belief of Ahimsa and yogic

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<sup>11</sup> Attenborough, *Gandhi*

<sup>12</sup> Ashe, 11-14

<sup>13</sup> Ashe, 28-49

<sup>14</sup> Attenborough, *Gandhi*

disciplines, that nonviolence is the highest virtue. He combines his skills in rhetoric, developed by his experiences in London cafes, with the ideas of truth and respect passed on by his mother. He uses his understanding of Western thought, that being the misconception that force can subdue the Indian people, and the Hinduism belief that:

The soul is not to be pierced,  
nor burned,  
nor drenched,  
nor dried;  
it is eternal,  
all-pervading and fixed-  
unmoving from the beginning.

to undermine an empire<sup>15</sup>. Thus, it is through Gandhi's education that the onlooker is able to understand the character of the man who was known as *Mahatma*.

Gandhi emphasized character development as an important element of education, both with his own children and others. He believed that knowledge without experience was led to a world of "talented thieves and gentlemen rascals"<sup>16</sup>. These experiences do not have to be firsthand for the students but can be the teachers experience in combination with the academic lessons. There is an important need for educators to not just bestow knowledge on their students but to "translate" the knowledge. The knowledge taught to students must also be processed through the teacher's life and experiences, providing students with lessons of character as well.<sup>17</sup> Gandhi's emphasis on character in western education is lacking, instead replaced by an emphasis on test scores.

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<sup>15</sup> Patton, 70

<sup>16</sup> Mahatma

<sup>17</sup> Mahatma



Educators are taught, and told, to focus on curriculum and test taking skills. Programs, such as the No Child Left Behind initiative, have led to students being rushed through material and instructed on test skills. Initiatives such as this, are placed with good intentions but lead to a system that enable poor character development for the function of grade scores. Students can regurgitate information and know how to identify patterns, but these practices disable our instructors from teaching soft skills. Furthermore our students are given computers and jobs skills believed to better prepare them for their occupational future, leaving them lacking in the social skills and the human element. Dr. Marcheta Evans Next study demonstrates the gap between these soft skills and the hard skills taught in academia. Skills such as emotional intelligence, complex reasoning and negotiation and persuasion. In 2018, 200 graduate students in academia and business were surveyed revealing that they had learned their intercommunication skills at work rather than through their degree, demonstrating that our education system had not prepared them for the human element of the job. Seeing this need of character development within its class curriculum, Stanford University has created a course titled Organizational Behavior 374: Interpersonal Dynamics.<sup>18</sup> Today western education is lacking to prepare students for the world after school. Gandhi's view of education, being more than just books and facts, is a necessity for a well-developed individual. Over the last decade employers have taken notice of this, claiming that new prospects lack soft skills and commons sense. There is a movement, with common core, job training, and new college courses, to reintroduce students to these values. These values are not mathematics or history and cannot be taught through blue books and scantrons.

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<sup>18</sup> Wood

Instead it would be beneficial to western society to realize that character is a necessity within our education system. That educators need to be allowed to focus on the material while emphasizing character. In order for this to happen our academic body must realize that education is more than job placement. Gandhi is the perfect example of this. Gandhi's education cannot be viewed by his time in British university alone, but by the conglomerate of his experiences. His time speaking with writers in cafes, spent at Muslim mosques, time spent reading wisdom literature, studying religions, and moral lessons taught by his parents are all apart of his education. Employers, and society, have been looking for a solution to the problem with the incoming workforce while disregarding the solution. The solution is how we, western society, views the value of education. Gandhi's life experiences can teach the academic community the importance of character in education, a lesson that is well overdue.

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