READ, THINK AND ENJOY

THE SECRET OF WORK

Swami Vivekanand

SWAMI VIVEKANAND (1863 – 1902) is one of the makers of modern India. His first name was Narendranath Dutt, but he became Vivekanand after he joined the Ashram of Ramkrishna Paramhans as his disciple. In his short span of life, he toured extensively in India and abroad and delivered scores of lectures in order to propagate the ideals of his teacher. He was perhaps the first Indian to raise his country and its culture in the eyes of the West. His lectures and writings possess a clarity and force which comes not only from the mastery of the language but also from his total commitment to the cause he was working for.

In the "Secret of Work", an extract from his Karma-yoga, Swami Vivekanand gives a remarkable exposition of the idea of non-attachment to action.

THE SECRET OF WORK

1 The miseries of the world cannot be cured by physical help only. Until man's natures change, his physical needs will always arise, and miseries will always be felt, and no amount of physical help will remove them completely. The only solution of the problem is to make the mankind pure. Ignorance is the mother of evil, and of all the misery we see. Let man have light, let them be pure and spiritually strong and educated; then alone will misery cease in the world. We may change every house of the country in a charitable asylum; we may fill the land with hospitals, but human misery will continue until man's character changes.

2 We read in *Bhagavad-Gita* again and again that we must all work incessantly. We cannot do any work which will not do some good somewhere; there cannot also be any work which cause some harm somewhere. Every work must necessarily be a mixture of good and evil; yet we are commanded to work incessantly. Good and evil will both have their consequences. Good action will entail upon us a good effect; bad

action bad. But good and bad both forge fetters for the soul. The solution reached in the *Geeta* in regard to this cramping influence of work is that if we do not attach ourselves to it, it will not hold our soul in bondage.

3 This is the one central idea in the *Geeta*; work incessantly, but be not attached to it. To use the simile of a lake for the mind, no ripple or wave that rises in it dies out entirely, but it leaves a mark and there is a possibility of that wave coming out again. This mark, with the possibility of the wave reappearing, is what is called *Samskara*. Every work that we do, every movement of the body, every thought that we think, leaves such an impression on mind, and even when the impressions are not obvious on the surface, they work in the subconscious region of the brain. What we are is determined every moment by the sum total of impressions on the mind. What I am just at this moment is the effect of the sum total of all the impressions of my past life. This is really what is meant by character; each man's character is determined by the sum total of these impressions. If good impressions prevail, the character becomes good; if bad, it becomes bad. If a man continuously hears bad words, thinks bad thoughts, does bad acts, his mind will be full of bad impressions; and they will influence his thought and work without his being conscious of the fact. These bad impressions will always be working, and their resultant must be evil, and the man will be a bad man: he cannot help it. The sum total of these impressions in him will create a strong motive power for doing bad acts. He will be like a machine in the hands of his impressions, and they will force him to do evil. Similarly, if a man thinks good thoughts and does good work, the sum total of their impressions will be good; and this, in a similar manner, will force him to do even in spite of himself. When a man has done so much good works and thought so many good thoughts that there is an irresistible tendency in him to do well in spite of himself and even if he wishes to do evil, his mind, as the sum total of his tendencies, will not allow him to do so; these will hold him back. When such is the case, the man's good character is said to be established.

4 As the tortoise tucks its feet and head inside the shell and will not come out even though you may break the shell into pieces, even so the character of the man who has control over his motives and organs is unchallangeably established. He controls his own inner forces, and nothing can draw them out against his will. By this continuous reflex of good impressions moving over the surface of the mind, the tendency to do good becomes strong, and in consequence we are able to control the *Indriyas* (sense – organs, the nerve – centres). Thus alone is the character formed, and only a man of character can get at truth. Such a man is safe for ever; he cannot do any evil. You may place him in any company, but there will be no danger for him. There is a still higher state than having this good tendency, and that is the desire for liberation. Liberation

means full freedom – freedom from the bondage of evil. A golden chain is as much a chain as an iron one. There is a thorn in my finger, and I use another to take the first one out, and when I have taken it out, I throw both of them aside. I have no necessity for keeping the second thorn, because it is a thorn after all. So bad tendencies are to be counteracted by good ones, and bad impressions on the mind should be removed by the fresh waves of good ones, until all that is evil almost disappears, or is subdued and held in control in a corner of the mind; but after that the good tendencies also have to be removed. Thus the 'attached' becomes the 'unattached'. Work, but let not the action or the thought produce a deep impression on your mind. Let the ripples come and go, let great actions proceed from the muscles and the brain, but let them not make any deep impression on the soul.

5 How can this be done? We see that the impression of every action to which we get attached remains. I may meet hundreds of persons during the day, and among them meet also one whom I love; but when I retire at night and try to think of all the faces I saw, only one face comes before the mind's eye – the face which I saw perhaps only for one minute and which I loved, all the others have vanished. Owing to my attachment to a particular person, his face caused a deeper impression on my mind than those of the others. But physically, the impressions have all been the same.

6 Therefore be 'unattached', yet the brain – centres work; work incessantly, but let not the mind be affected. Work as if you were a stranger in this land, a sojourner; work incessantly, but do not blind yourselves; bondage is terrible. This world is not our habitation; it is only one of the many stages through which we are passing.

7 The gist of this teaching is that you should work like a master and not like a slave; work incessantly, but do not do slave's work. Do you not see how everybody works? Nobody can be altogether at rest; ninety nine per cent of men work like slaves, and the result is misery; it is all selfish work. But work with freedom, inspired by love! There is no true love possible in the slave. If you buy a slave and tie him down in chains and make him work for you, he will work like a drudge, but there will be no love in him. So when we ourselves work for the things of the world as slaves, there can be no love in us, and work is not true work. This is true of work done for relatives and friends, and is true of work done for ourselves. Selfish work is slave's work; and here is a test. Every act of loving brings happiness; there is no act of love which does not bring peace and happiness; there is no act of love which does not bring peace and blessedness in its train. Real existence, real knowledge, and real love are eternally connected with one another, the three in one; where one of them is, the others also must be; they are the three aspects of the One without a second – the Existence – Knowledge – Bliss.

8 Krishna says: 'Look at me, Arjuna! If I stop from work for one moment, the whole universe will decay. I have nothing to gain from work: I am the one Lord, but why do I work? Because I love the world.' God is unattached because He loves; real love makes us unattached.

9 To attain this unattachment is almost a life's work, but as soon as we have reached this point, we have attained the goal of love and become free; the bondage of nature falls from us, and we see nature as she is.

10 Do you ask anything of your children in return for what you have given them? It is your duty to work for them, and there the matter ends. In whatever you do for a particular person, a city, or a state, assume the same attitude towards it as you have towards your children – expect nothing in return. If you can invariably take the position of a giver, in which everything given by you is a free offering to the world, without any thought of return, your work will bring you no attachment. Attachment comes only where we expect return.

11 If working like slaves results in selfish attachment, working as masters of our own mind gives rise to the bliss of non – attachment. We often talk of right and justice, but we find that in this world right and justice are mere baby's talks. There are two things which guide the conduct of men: might and mercy. The exercise of might is invariably an act of selfishness. All men and women try to make the most of whatever power or advantage they have. Mercy is heavenly, to be good, we have all to be merciful. Even justice and right should stand on mercy. All thought of obtaining return for the work we do hinders our spiritual progress; nay, in the end it brings misery. There is another way in which this idea of mercy and selfless charity can be put into practice; that is, by looking upon work as 'worship'. Here we give up all the fruits of our work unto the Lord, and, worshipping Him thus, we have no right to expect anything from mankind for what we do. The Lord Himself works incessantly and is ever without attachment. Just as water cannot wet the lotus leaf, so work cannot bind the unselfish man by giving rise to attachment to results. The selfless and unattached man may live in the very heart of a crowded and sinful city, yet he will not be touched by sin.

GANDHIJI'S PASSION FOR NURSING

MAHATMA GANDHI was an extraordinary person who performed great deeds. His thoroughness in handling tasks that are considered commonplace was remarkable. In addition to being the undisputed leader of the Indian Freedom Movement, he was an accomplished nurse as well.

GANDHIJI'S PASSION FOR NURSING

1 From boyhood Gandhiji had a passion for nursing. After school hours he ran back home to nurse his ailing father. He gave his father medicine, dressed his wound and prepared drugs prescribed by the *vaids*. As he grew older his craving for serving the sick grew stronger. He decided to devote two hours daily to nursing in a charitable hospital in South Africa. To find time for this work, he handed over many legal cases to a friend as he could not attend to all the work brought to him.

2 In 1896, when Gandhiji returned to India for a short time, he kept himself busy informing the Indian leaders about the plight of Indians settled in South Africa. His time was taken up in writing and distributing useful articles and letters. Yet the moment he came to know that his brother-in-law was seriously ill, and his sister could not afford to employ a nurse, he brought the patient to his house, put him in his own room and nursed him day and night.

3 For about one month, Gandhiji dressed the wound of his eight-year-old son who had fractured his arm. He undid the doctor's bandage, washed the wound, applied a clean mud-poultice and tied up the arm till it healed. Another son, who was ten, had an attack of typhoid. For 40 days Gandhiji nursed him. He wrapped up the child's body in wet cloth and enclosed him in dry blankets in spite of his piteous cries. He took great care of and showed tender love for his patients but did not allow any lapse in treatment.

While nursing another typhoid case, Gandhiji for a fortnight applied earth treatment to a child. Every hour and a half he placed on his abdomen a new pack of mud one inch thick. After remission of fever, the child was allowed to have a diet of ripe bananas. Gandhiji himself mashed the bananas for fifteen minutes and coaxed the child to eat it. He did not entrust this work to his mother lest the patient was overfed. While treating the sick, Gandhiji tried to keep the patient's mind at peace. He was against all addiction but once when a South Indian boy was ill and craved for a cup of coffee, he himself prepared it and served it to him.

4 He sponged the patients, bathed them and applied mud-poultices. He was more than a nurse to his patients. He had no fear of any infection. A beggar who was suffering from leprosy once came to him. Gandhiji offered him shelter, dressed his wounds for some days and later sent him to a hospital. Once, a fellow prisoner developed symptoms of leprosy. Gandhiji got permission to visit him regularly. He was later sheltered in Sevagram for years. Gandhiji dressed his wounds.

5 On two historic occasions, Gandhiji found a greater scope for offering his services as a nurse. One was the Boer War and the other Zulu Rebellion. On both the occasions he raised an Indian Ambulance Corps that tended the sick and carried the wounded. He proved an able leader of the nursing squad and marched miles and miles bearing the wounded on a stretcher. He was happy to nurse the Zulus who were flogged and left unattended, as the white Sisters of Mercy refused to nurse them. Their wounds were festering. For his service he was awarded the Zulu War Medal and the Kaisar-e-Hind gold medal.

6 When plague broke out in the gold mines of South Africa, many Indian labourers fell sick. The moment Gandhiji heard of it, he went there with four assistants. No hospital was nearby. A vacant godown was broken open, some beds were installed in it and twenty-three patients were taken there. The municipality thanked him for this prompt action and supplied him with disinfectants and sent a nurse. She had a good stock of brandy as a preventive. Gandhiji had no faith in it. He gave medical aid and cleaned the patients' beds, sat by their bedside at night and cheered them up. With the permission of the attending doctor he applied earth treatment to three patients. Two of them survived. All other patients, including the nurse, died. To keep fit for rendering service, he believed, was as much the duty of a nurse as to look after the needs of a patient. He always took precautions and never ate his fill when overworked. For bringing down his blood pressure he often put a mud-poultice on his head. With an earth-bandage on his forehead he said to the Japanese poet Yone

Noguchi, "I sprang from Indian earth and so it is Indian earth that crowns me." He seldom got disturbed at the critical turn of a patient's condition and with cool nerve nursed his wife and his sons. Twice Kasturba fell seriously ill in South Africa. The doctors had little hope of her recovery. Gandhiji nursed her with patience, courage and alertness. Once, after her release from a South African jail, she grew very weak. Gandhiji helped her clean her teeth, made coffee for her, and once tried to comb her hair. Early in the morning he carried her out from the bedroom and made her rest a whole day in the open air, in the shade of a tree. As the sun changed its course, he shifted the bed.

7 To get a trained Indian nurse in South Africa was difficult and there was every chance of a white midwife's refusal to attend a coloured woman. When Kasturba was bearing a child, Gandhiji learnt midwifery and helped the safe delivery of his last child.

WITH THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Stephen Leacock

1 'I want my photograph taken,' I said. The photographer looked at me without *enthusiasm*. He was a thin man in a grey suit, with the dim eyes of a natural scientist. But there is no need to describe him. Everybody knows what a photographer is like.

2 'Sit there,' he said, 'and wait.'

3 I waited an hour. I read the Ladies' Companion for 1912, the Girls' Magazine for 1902, and the Infants' Journal for 1888. I began to see that I had done an *impertinent* thing in breaking in on the privacy of this man's scientific *pursuits* with a face like mine.

4 After an hour the photographer opened the inner door.

5 'Come in,' he said severely.

6 I went into the studio.

7 'Sit down,' said the photographer.

8 I sat down in a beam of sunlight *filtered* through a sheet of factory cotton hung against a *frosted window*.

9 The photographer rolled a machine into the middle of the room and crawled into it from behind.

10 He was in only a second – just time enough for one look at me – and then he was out again, tearing at the cotton sheet and the window-panes with a hooked stick, apparently *frantic* for light and air.

11 Then he crawled back into the machine again and drew a little black cloth over himself. This time he was very quiet in there. I knew that he was praying and I kept still.

12 When the photographer came out at last, he looked very *grave* and shook his head.

13 'The face is quite wrong,' he said.

'I know,' I answered quietly; 'I have always known.'

He sighed.

'I think,' he said, 'the face would be better *three* quarters full.'

'I'm sure it would,' I said enthusiastically for I was glad to find that the man had such a human side to him. 'So would yours.' In fact, I continued, 'how many faces one sees that are apparently hard, narrow, limited, but the minute you get them three-quarters full they get wide, large, almost *boundless* in-'

But the photographer had ceased to listen. He came over and took my head in his hands and twisted it sideways. I thought he meant to kiss me, and I closed my eyes.

But I was wrong.

He twisted my face as far as it would go and then stood looking at it.

He sighed again.

'I don't like the head,' he said.

Then he went back to the machine and took another look.

'Open the mouth a little,' he said.

I started to do so.

'Close it,' he added quickly.

Then he looked again.

"The ears are bad,' he said, 'drop them a little more. Thank you. Now the eyes. Roll them in under the eyelids. Put the hands on the knees, please, and turn the face just a little upwards. Yes, that's better. Now just expand the lungs! So! And bend the neck – that's it – just *contract* the face, it's just a little too full, but - '

I swung myself round on the stool

'Stop,' I said with emotion but, I think with *dignity*. 'This face is my face. It is not yours: it is mine. I've lived with it for forty years and I know its faults.

I know it's not beautiful; I know it wasn't made for me; but it's my face – the only one I have' – I was conscious of a break in my voice, but I went on – ' such as it is, I've learned to love it. And this is my mouth, not yours. These ears are mine, and if your machine is too narrow -' Here I started to rise from the seat.

Snick!

The photographer had pulled the string. The photograph was taken. I could see the machine still shaking from the shock.

'I think', said the photographer, with a pleased smile, 'that I caught the features just in a moment of *animation*.

35 'So!' I said bitingly, features, ch? You did not think I could animate them, I s
But let me see the picture.'

36 'Oh, there's nothing to see yet,' he said. I have to develop the negative firs
back on Saturday, and I'll let you see a *proof* of it,'

37 On Saturday I went back.

38 The photographer beckoned me in. I thought he seemed quieter and gra
before. I think, too, there was a certain pride in his manner.

39 He unfolded the proof of a large photograph and we both looked at it in s

40 'Is it me?' I asked.

41 'Yes', he said quietly, 'it is you,' and he went on looking at it.

42 'The eyes,' I said hesitatingly, 'don't look very much like mine.'

43 'Oh, no,' he answered. 'I've retouched them: they come out splendidl
they.'

44 'Fine.' I said: 'but surely my eyebrows are not like that?

45 'No,' said the photographer with a momentary glance at my face, 'the ey
are removed. We have a process now for putting in new ones. You'll noti
we've applied it to carry the hair away from the brow. I don't like the hair low
skull.

46 'Oh, you don't, don't you?' I said.

47 'No,' he went on, 'I don't' care for it. I like to get the hair back further an
out a new brow line.'

48 'What about the mouth,' I said, with a bitterness that was lost on the photog
'is that mine?'

49 'It's adjusted a little,' he said; 'yours is too low. I found I couldn't use it.'

50 'The ears, though,' I said, 'strike me as a good likeness : they are just like

51 'Yes,' said the photographer thoughtfully, 'that is so : but I can fix that all righ
print. We have a process now for removing the ears entirely. I'll see if - '

52 'Listen,' I interrupted, drawing myself up and animating my features to th
extent and speaking with a bitterness that should have blasted the man on the
came here for a photograph, a picture, something which – bad though it s
would have looked like me. I wanted something that would *depict* my face as H
gave it to me, humble though the gift may have been. I wanted something t
friends might keep after my death, to *reconcile* them to my loss. It seems tha
mistaken. What I wanted is not done. Go on, then, with your *brutal* work. Tak
negative, or whatever it is you call it, dip it in anything you like; remove th

correct the mouth, adjust the face, restore the lips, reanimate the neckti
the waistcoat. Coat it with an inch of gloss, shade it, *gild* it, till even y
that it is finished. Then when you have done all that, keep it for y
friends. They may value it. To me it is but a worthless *trifle*.'

I burst into tears and left. (*Adapted from Behind the Beyond*)