



Non Stealing (Asteya)

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KEYWORDS

Vow, non- stealing (asteya). It is one of the live great vows (mahavratas) of ancient India; and Gandhi prescribes it as necessary for the realization of self or Truth. It advises us not to take away the property of anyone unless he permits us. Right to private property is a recognized custom, and hence to steal the property of somebody else is to deprive him of the possession, the source of his livelihood. That is to say, thieving means committing injury or harm to somebody else. This goes outright against the principle of Truth and non-violence which, being two sides of the same coin, form the nucleus of Gandhi’s thought. Thus Gandhi, following the ancient trend, comments the vow of non-stealing in his own way. Secondly, it has a wider range than what is commonly ascribed to it. By stealing we generally mean robbing others of their property. But Gandhi gives it a meaning and expands its scope. An individual who eats or enjoys something secretly ignoring the other members of his family (say a father eats something secretly and keeps his children in the dark about it); takes away for selfgratification something from common-property (for example, a singly crystal of sugar from the ashram kitchen store); takes anything belonging to another without his permission although he knows it; appropriates something that appears to be nobody’s property (e.g., an article lying uncared for on the roadside or elsewhere) is a thief in Gandhi’s eyes. Here it is noteworthy that an accrual of property, if legitimate, does not fall within its purview.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, to consume a commodity of any value that is unnecessary for simple and natural life is thieving, not to speak of extravagance and immoderate or

wasteful luxury. To quote Gandhi, “It is theft to take something from another even with his permission if we have no real need of it. We should not receive any single thing that we do not need.”<sup>2</sup> “Eighthly, the observance of non-stealing requires an individual “to be humble, thoughtful, vigilant and in habits simple.” This is a universal code for allsatyagrahis. To sums up: Like all other vows Gandhi’s prescription of non-stealing has its source in his philosophical outlook, i.e., a conscious and voluntary indifference towards earthly objects, both ideal and real. Although derived from ancient Indian tradition he reoriented and enriched it. This ascetic ideal was turned by him into one for observance by common man. In fact, an attitude of non-stealing fosters tranquility both physical and mental in an individual. In these days of conflict and selfishness, competition and greed, it offers, however small, solace and relief; and awakens a value sense in us.<sup>3</sup>

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