

STUDY MATERIAL - 01

THE STORY OF MY EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH

INTRODUCTION

Mohandas K. Gandhi was the foremost leader who used nonviolent civil disobedience—that means protest and non-cooperation without hurting anyone—to rally India to independence from Britain in the first half of the 1900s and who conducted plenty of other mass actions fighting for the rights of Indians in his country and in South Africa. His life inspired others famous for their human rights work, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela. He was out-of-control influential as a leader, political figure, and icon of human rights.

The Story of My Experiments with Truth, first published in two volumes in 1927 and 1929, is Gandhi's autobiography. Between the pages of this book, we get an intimate look at Gandhi's life—he wrote other works, but this autobiography is all about his ideals, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings—not the famous campaigns you can read about elsewhere.

In short, this autobiography details how Gandhi, across his life, was someone who searched for Truth with a capital T—which he identifies with God—by purifying himself through fasting, diet control, giving up sex, the study of religion, and other techniques. He sees *ahimsa*, or non-violence, as the means by which to find truth. It means more than just refraining from hurting people: it means loving all life on earth and seeking to do good for everyone, even those who oppose you.

Here's the real beauty of this book: Gandhi's autobiography shows us a powerful role model for change. Sure, you might not be trying to live only on fruits and nuts (like Gandhi did), but you might be striving to improve yourself in some way that's still a challenge. Watching Gandhi's masterful self-control and hearing him express his convictions about his ideals is both a) inspiring and b) comforting. Gandhi encourages us, but he also tells us that it's okay to take life seriously and try to be the best we can be.

Without coming off as judgmental or self-righteous, he tells us why he humbly believes his deeds bring him closer to truth and God. Reading about

how he implements these changes—or experiments with truth, as he calls them—we can't help but be mind-boggled. And *deeply* inspired.

By changing ourselves, Gandhi says, we're soon able to change the world around us since, as he puts it, purification is highly infectious. It may seem like an impossible task to someday make a difference in the world, but it starts with the little things...and this book is an illustration of just how much power can be drawn from implementing small changes in your life.

The Structure:

Gandhi's autobiography is divided into an intro, five parts with chapters, and a closing. Most chapters are short and cover a brief episode or two in his life. His account is pretty much in chronological order. The intro outlines his quest for truth, and the closing sums it up, so they show the big-picture message.

Part One gives us Gandhi's birth (October 2, 1869), childhood, teens, and time in England. He's influenced as a kid by his religiously tolerant political official father and devout mother. At age 13 (!), he's married to Kasturbai in a child marriage, meaning she's a teenager, too, and their parents are the ones who decide they should get married.

After a few years, she becomes pregnant with the first of Gandhi's four children. Once Gandhi's father dies, a family friend suggests Gandhi to go to England to study law to keep the family in a high status. However, his caste tells him it's against their religion for him to travel abroad.

Meanwhile, his mother is worried he'll lose his way in the foreign culture and start drinking alcohol, eating meat (his family is vegetarian), and sleeping with women other than his wife, who's to stay at home in India while her husband has his big adventure. Gandhi tells his caste he's definitely going to England, and they can go ahead and kick him out...which they do.

As for his mother's concerns, Gandhi takes serious vows not to touch alcohol, meat, or other women. With that, he's off to England. After being called to the bar (i.e., after officially becoming a lawyer), he returns to India.

Part Two tells us all about his time in South Africa, where he goes to work with a law firm. He gets kicked off a train due to "colour prejudice" (which is what he calls racism), and he decides to fight back—non-violently, of course.

He continues studying religion and founds the Natal Indian Congress. He heads back to India for a while, where he meets his mentor Gokhale and others, but is soon recalled to South Africa to continue "public work," which is his term for what we today might call activism.

In Part Three, Gandhi develops his spiritual practice of self-restraint by taking the *brahmacharya* vow of celibacy—by now, he's had his four sons, all with Kasturbai—and develops his political power by leading an Indian ambulance corps in the Boer War. He returns to India, where he attends the Indian National Congress and stays with Gokhale, his mentor. He also practices law there. When his second son becomes very ill, Gandhi refuses the doctor's advice to give him meat broth, which goes to show how seriously our author takes his religious ideals. Gandhi is full steam ahead by this point for sure.

Part Four has Gandhi fighting the Asiatic Department in the Transvaal, giving legal advice to Johannesburg Indians in land acquisition cases, organizing an Indian Volunteer Corps for the Great War, and more. He tells us about his religious studies, his experiments in diet (fruits and nuts only: dang), and his thoughts on the *brahmacharya* vow. He's glad to be celibate, saying that life with sex is "insipid and animal-like." He feels the self-restraint of celibacy is a purifying practice that makes him a better seeker of truth.

Part Five shows Gandhi at the height of his political power. He founds the Satyagraha Ashram in Ahmedabad, secures help for peasants in Champaran, fights the Rowlatt legislation, suspends Satyagraha after people become violent, edits newspapers, and gets a non-cooperation resolution passed by the Nagpur Congress. And that's just *some* of what he does politically.

There's also his decision to drink goat's milk when a doctor recommends it for a terrible illness. Gandhi had seen all milk as an animal product, like vegans do today, but decided he needed strength for his public work and that his vow to his mother not to touch milk only encompassed buffalo and cow milk. Gandhi writes that even if drinking goat's milk doesn't violate the letter of his vow, it violates the spirit, and he feels quite conflicted and pained over his choice.
