

# ASPECTS OF GANDHI'S INTERPRETATION OF BHAGAVAD GITA\*

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**Abstract:** *The intent of our investigation is to expose and interpret aspects of Gandhi's meditation on the Bhagavad Gita. One of the aims of Gandhi's meditation on the Gita consists in searching for the foundations of the right moral thought and for the foundations of the right individual education. The revelation of the Gita is for the individual, among other things, a journey towards the discovery of himself and of his position in the reality; it is a journey towards the discovery of the possible developments of his own soul.*

*The foundation of the right individual education has immediate social aspects: the right education proves to represent the very foundation of the right political action. In Gandhi's view, the political doctrine and the political action ought to have as their own foundation the teachings of the Gita. The revelation of the Gita gives the individual the right moral education and the right moral foundation: it gives the knowledge of truth, of God, of reality, and of the individual nature. Through and thanks to the teachings of the Gita, the individual's education finds the due foundation. The correct moral education is the basis of a right political and social order; it represents the basis for the dialogue between individuals and for the peaceful coexistence between individuals. The morally right order of the society is the consequence of the morally right order of the individual.*

*Thus, the meditation on the Gita constitutes the foundation of the possibility of a right political strategy. Thanks to the education obtained through the meditation on the Gita, the individual is able to understand the right moral behaviour: this has an immediate effect on the structure and organisation of the whole society. In order that the society can be morally changed, the individual ought to develop his moral constitution in a right way. There may not be any right political programme without a previous individual right moral education.*

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*The analysis of the position of individuals within the reality and the investigation on the individual soul constitution enables the individual to reach an appropriate strategy for a right moral education. Since individuals consist of the three gunas — sattva, rajas, and tamas —, individuals are, as such, complex entities. Individuals are, moreover, dynamic entities: the development of the three gunas inside the individual soul, the relationships between the gunas in the soul, and the prevalence of a guna over the other gunas within the souls are not given once and for all; they depend on the education and on the life choices of the individuals. The prevalence of a guna over the other ones is due to the free decision of the individual; depending on how the individual decides to orientate his own life and depending on which parts of the soul the individual decides to cultivate, the soul of the individual will take a corresponding direction and will have a corresponding development. The responsibility for the development of one's own life belongs to the individual.*

*The corporeal dimension puts precise limits on the individual capacity of self-improvement within the corporeal life. Individuals ought to accept the limits due to their bodily dimension. At the same time, individuals ought to steadily try to improve themselves by promoting the virtues connected to sattva; the being-limited of individuals does not imply an absence of responsibility of the individuals as regards the moral value of their own actions. Individuals have the responsibility for being aware of their own constitution and for fighting against the limitations of their own condition. The fact that individuals are constitutively imperfect entails that individuals ought to educate themselves continuously; the individual ought to reach a moral foundation and ought to steadily pay attention to the stability of his own character.*

*The main works analysed throughout our inquiry are Gandhi's Discourses on the "Gita", contained in The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), pp. 94–376, and the work of Mahadev Desai, The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi.*

**Keywords:** *Gandhi, Bhagavad Gita, Atman, Moksha, Gita, Sattva, Tamas, Rajas, Desai, Mahabarata, Satyagraha.*

## 1) Preamble

In our study, we shall investigate some aspects of Gandhi's meditation on the *Bhagavad Gita*<sup>3</sup>. We shall search for aspects regarding Gandhi's strategy

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<sup>3</sup> In our inquiry, we are interested in Gandhi's interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* and in the aims which Gandhi had in his interpretation. Therefore, we are not

of meditation on the *Gita*: Gandhi's observations on the *Gita* regard many aspects, such as Divinity, the problem of good and evil, the structure of the reality, the individual's nature, the conflict present in the individual's nature between virtue and vice, the individual's position in the reality, the individual's possible developments, and the duties of the individual as regards his own moral development. Gandhi's meditation on the *Gita* proves to be an inquiry into the foundations of reality, of morality, and of society. Thus, the aim of our analysis consists in reconstructing Gandhi's steps towards the discovery of these foundations.

We would like to begin our inquiry with a quotation taken from Gandhi's *Discourses on the "Gita"*, since we think that Gandhi's statements, as they are expressed in this specific passage, represent a good synthesis of all the considerations, aims, and goals expressed throughout his work of interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

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going to analyse the defensibility of Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gita* and to expose the possible criticisms of Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gita*. Our attention is directed to the investigation of the elements which Gandhi found in the *Gita* in order to build and develop his own thought. The meditation on *Gita* is a process of formation for Gandhi. For our analysis of Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gita*, we resorted to and shall refer, within this contribution, to Gandhi's *Discourses on the "Gita"*, contained in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)*, pp. 94–376. We also resorted to and, within our contribution, shall also refer to the work of Mahadev Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi* since Gandhi's exposition of *Anāsaktiyoga* gives very important elements for the understanding of Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gita*. The notes we have written on Gandhi's meditations on the *Gita* refer only to a little part of the contents which can actually be found in the whole extension of Gandhi's meditations on the *Gita*. As regards this research, we are interested in those observations of Gandhi which deal with *Gita's* considerations on the individual's nature. As regards commentaries and studies on the *Gita* (besides the analysis contained in Desai's work), we consulted the following works: S.M. Srinivasa Chari, *The Philosophy of Bhagavadgītā; The Bhagavad Gita. With Text, Translation, and Commentary in the Words of Sri Aurobindo; The Bhagavad Gītā (Sanskrit Text, Transliteration, English Translation & Philological Notes). Introduction by W. Douglas P. Hill. Translated by John Davies; Ithamar Theodor, Exploring the Bhagavad Gītā. Philosophy, Structure and Meaning*. All the pieces of information regarding the studies used for this contribution can be found in the bibliography contained at the end of this analysis. The responsibility for the interpretation which we expose in our paper is, of course, ours alone.

'And so Krishna says:

"Though I was never born in time, though I am the Lord of all creatures, I incarnate Myself and am born as a human being."

This is the essential nature of the *atman*. If we realize this truth, we would always act in conformity with that nature; we then act, though born as human beings, as if we were never born. If the *atman* in each of us is identical with the *atman* in everyone else, one *atman* born in a body means all of them born, and all others born means that one born too.

[...] We can follow reason only up to a point. What, then, does avatar mean? It is not as if God comes down from above. It would be right to say, if we can say it without egotism, that each one of us is an avatar. The *atman* in every body is as potent as the *atman* in any other, though outwardly we see differences. In our awakened state all are one, though in our ignorant state we may seem separate existences. In real truth, there are not several, there is only one.<sup>4</sup>

This passage represents, in our opinion, a synthesis of Gandhi's foundations as regards the moral and the political order which Gandhi is aiming to establish. The following principles of Gandhi's interest in and interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* can, in our opinion, be extracted from the passage quoted above:

- God is present in the individuals's dimension. Gandhi's God is not an absent God. God's descent shows that God is not extraneous to the individuals. He is not the absolutely other in relation to the individuals. He does not exist in a dimension which is completely different from the individuals's dimension. God is not absolutely transcendent. Individuals, correspondingly, are not only immanent, since they all are manifestations of *atman*.

- The individual's learning that the nature of the individuals is *atman* implies, for the individual, a corresponding programme of action. The individual's mind is not given once and for all; it can have and will have a development.

- Everybody is an avatar of God, and everybody is a manifestation, a concretisation of *atman*. Everybody is a manifestation of the Divinity. Individuals are unified in *atman*.

- *Atman* is identical in all individuals: *atman* is equally potent in all individuals.

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 189.

- The fact that atman is equally present in all individuals means that everybody has equal dignity. Since all individuals are avatars of God, and since atman is equally potent in all individuals, then all individuals are equal. Hence, no consideration of the individuals as unequal entities is legitimate.

- All individuals are one and only one entity; they all are atman. There are, actually, no separately existing individuals.

- Individuals can change through the knowledge of the revelation; their nature is not determined, at least not in all aspects. They have a space of development.

- From the acquaintance with his being atman, the individual learns that he ought to give up his attachment to the ego, since this attachment directly leads to the mutual separation of the individuals. The road to the recognition of the common nature of atman proves to be, therefore, the road to liberation from the attachment to the ego. The road of knowledge is the road to liberation.

- Since all individuals are one entity in atman, they ought to act in conformity with the common nature of atman; reciprocal harmony, and not mutual strife, ought to be the principle of their behaviour and of their mind disposition.

- To learn that he is a manifestation of atman leads the individual to act as though he were never born; he assumes the dimension and the awareness of being eternal. Therewith, the individual becomes able to free himself from the particular historical conditions in which he is living. The individual acquires a point of view on the whole reality which is completely different from the point of view which he originally had; he becomes able to mentally transcend the particularities of his initial life condition. He becomes able to understand that he is spiritually something other than the particular conditions in which he is living. The individual's mind is being transformed through and thanks to the revelation of the *Gita*.

- The recognition of the identical presence of atman in everybody represents the passage from the ignorant state – in which individuals think that they are mutually separate existences – to the awakened state – in which individuals become aware that they all are one entity.

- Since the individual condition of being an avatar can be known only after meditating on the *Gita*, learning the contents of the revelation proves

to be indispensable for the moral formation of the individual<sup>5</sup>. There can be no authentic education without meditation on the revelation.

- The individual's awareness of one's own condition and position in the reality is developed through the individual's learning of the *Gita*. The awakened state will not come about by itself; the individual's engagement is needed. The *Gita* proves to be the source of the individual's enlightenment and of the individual's transformation.

## 2) Introduction

Coming now to a description of our inquiry, we would like to analyse in our contribution some of Gandhi's considerations on the *Gita*. The aim which we have in our investigation is to show that the meditation on the *Gita* represents, for Gandhi, the search for and the discovery of the foundations of the individual's education. The right education of the individual has precise social consequences: it represents the foundation of a good order within a society and between societies. In Gandhi's meditation on *Gita's* teachings, we can see that the reflections on the individual condition described within the *Gita* are connected to a collective and to a social dimension. The teachings of the *Gita* represent, for Gandhi, a programme for the foundation of the right moral and political action.

Throughout his meditation on the *Gita*, Gandhi aims to show that the knowledge of the revelation of the *Gita* can give the person the right moral education and the right moral foundations. The *Gita* teaches, on the one hand, that the nature of the individual is given as regards his own components – i.e., the three gunas: sattva, rajas, and tamas –. The *Gita* also teaches, on the other hand, that the nature of the individual is not given as regards the degree of strength and of influence of each of these components. The components of the individual are given, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, the concrete development of the individuals is not given; this development depends on the individual's decisions as regards his intellectual development.

Gandhi states that the individual is responsible for the evolution and development which his own components will have within his own person;

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<sup>5</sup> In this context, we intentionally limit the analysis of this particular passage to a few notes since the passage will find a more extended comment thereafter. We exclusively aim to find through this passage some of Gandhi's principles in order to gain elements which can be relevant for the whole inquiry.

this development is open. The individual is free to choose, can choose, and ought actually to choose the direction of his moral development. As a consequence, the right moral development will not come about by itself, nor will the right political order come about by itself; the individual ought to act for the right moral and political organisation to be realised.

The engagement of the individual is required both for due learning and for due acting. First of all, the individual needs and ought to learn his own condition in the reality, the elements of his own nature, and the possible ways of his own development. In a certain measure, the nature of the individual is yet to come about, since exclusively the components of the individual's nature and not the concrete development of the components of the individual's nature are given. The form which the different components take depends on the education of the individuals. Correspondingly, there is not a unique nature for all the individuals; there is only a unique series of components. The authentic nature is to come about and will come about on the basis of the development which the individual, on the basis of his own choice and his own responsibility, will reach. The strengthening of a component or of another component depends on the individual choice.

In Gandhi's view, the process of learning obtained through meditating on the whole *Gita* can give each individual the knowledge of truth, of God, of reality, and of his own essence. Through this process of learning, the individual acquires the capacity to organise and modify his own mind towards the right moral condition. For instance, thanks to the teachings of the *Gita*, the individual comes to know the existence of the three gunas – the qualities of reality *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. In particular, the individual learns that his own nature consists of these three qualities and that the influence of these qualities can be modified depending on the level of education reached by the individual. In Gandhi's view, learning *Gita's* teachings and meditating on *Gita's* contents turns out to be indispensable for improving, in every individual, the strength of the good component of his own soul (i.e., *sattva*) and for diminishing the influence exercised by the other components of his soul (i.e., *rajas* and *tamas*)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> *Sattva*, *tamas*, and *rajas* are defined, in the translation of the *Gita* contained in Desai's work, in the following way: 'XIV 6. Of these *sattva*, being stainless, is light-giving and healing; it binds with the bond of happiness and the bond of knowledge, O sinless one.' 'XIV 7. *Rajas*, know thou, is of the nature of passion, the source of thirst and attachment; it keeps man bound with the bond of action.' 'XIV

Furthermore, through *Gita's* principles, the individual becomes able to know that he ought to improve the force of *sattva* and to diminish the force of *rajas* and *tamas*. The place of the individual development is, therefore, the meditation on the revelation.

Correspondingly, without the process of learning and without the process of maturation produced within the individual's mind by this process of meditation, the individual will have no possibility to learn the duty to improve the strength of *sattva* in himself and to learn the duty to diminish the force of *rajas* and of *tamas*<sup>7</sup>.

*Gita's* revelation teaches that all individuals have a common nature; since all individuals are avatars of God, they constitute a common entity. Atman is the common foundation of all individuals. In spite of the fact that they appear to be divided and mutually separated, all individuals are, actually, one entity with each other. They are atman; they are manifestations of the same principle. Based on this point, Gandhi is able to

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8. *Tamas*, know thou, born of ignorance, is mortal man's delusion; it keeps him bound with heedlessness, sloth and slumber, O Bharata.' 'XIV 9. *Sattva* attaches man to happiness, *rajas* to action, and *tamas*, shrouding knowledge, attaches him to heedlessness.' (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 327; the passages are also quoted in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)*, p. 315). To be noted, among other things, is the connection of *sattva* with spiritual knowledge and the connection of *tamas* with the concealment of spiritual knowledge. *Tamas* is the component directly opposed to spiritual knowledge and, therefore, to the education of the individual. The individual needs to limit the influence of *tamas* if he wants to arrive at spiritual knowledge. Correspondingly, to reach knowledge means as such limiting the power of *tamas*.

<sup>7</sup> The relations holding among the three forces are modified by the process of strengthening of one of them over the others: 'XIV 10. *Sattva* prevails, O Bharata, having overcome *rajas* and *tamas*; *rajas*, when it has overpowered *sattva* and *tamas*; likewise *tamas* reigns when *sattva* and *rajas* are crushed.' (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 327). This passage shows that the relation among the three qualities can change. The components of the reality and of the soul are given, but their strength and influence within the individual are not given; they can be modified. The point is that *sattva* can prevail only after a process of meditation and of education. *Sattva* does not arise by alone; the individual needs and ought to act so that *sattva* can become stronger and stronger. The improvement of *sattva* turns out to be, therefore, a difficult process for the individual. The individual engagement is needed for the development of *sattva*.



state that the division between individuals has no ground to exist. Therefore, the knowledge of the *Gita* can immediately provide norms of behaviour for the individuals between each other.

To summarise, learning about the revelation of the *Gita* is the right way for the individual to reach greater and greater degrees of right moral disposition; the truth manifested by the *Gita* will represent the foundation for the morally right individual and for peace between individuals. The right political action has its foundation in the right moral formation. As a result, the improvement of the individuals brings about the improvement of the political and social order in which individuals live. Through and thanks to the *Gita's* teachings, education finds its due foundation. This is the basis of the right political and social order; it represents, for Gandhi, the indispensable foundation of the dialogue between individuals and of the peaceful coexistence between individuals. There is no separation between the morally right political strategy, on the one hand, and the right moral education, on the other hand. The right political strategy needs the right moral education; the right education of the individual is the basis for the right political order<sup>8</sup>.

### 3) Summary of Gandhi's positions

In the following summary, we can find the main ideas of Gandhi which we have already introduced in part and which we are going to develop further in our contribution:

i) Gandhi firmly believes in the power of transformation exercised, on the individuals, by the knowledge of the truth, i.e., by the learning of the revelation. The knowledge of the truth expressed in the revelation of the *Gita* successfully modifies men as regards their moral dimension<sup>9</sup>. The

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout Gandhi's meditation on the *Gita*, we can observe the presence of reflections which are directed to the education and formation of the individual as such. Furthermore, we can observe the presence of reflections which expose the norms deriving, for society, from this education and this formation. Gandhi's attention is directed to both aspects.

<sup>9</sup> The connection between spiritual knowledge and *sattva* can be found in the following statements of the *Gita*: 'XIV 11. When the light – knowledge – shines forth from all the gates of this body, then it may be known that the *sattva* thrives.' 'XIV 12. Greed, activity, assumption of undertakings, restlessness, craving – these are in evidence when *rajas* flourishes, O Bharatarshabha.' 'XIV 13. Ignorance,

spiritual knowledge obtained through the meditation on the *Gita* transforms the individual mind<sup>10</sup>. Individuals ought to develop themselves from their initial condition; revelation is the teaching programme for development.

ii) To follow the truth does not admit any exception, since God is the truth.

iii) The knowledge of the truth and the learning process needed for the individual to grasp this kind of knowledge, are indispensable for the individual in order that he can find the foundations both of the right moral disposition and of the right political order<sup>11</sup>. The right moral individual education is the indispensable basis for the right political order.

iv) Individuals are composed entities. They consist of different components which do not live in harmony with each other.

v) Individuals are morally limited entities; they cannot completely eliminate bad factors as long as they are in the corporeal dimension.

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dullness, heedlessness, and delusion — these are in evidence when *tamas* reigns, O Kurunandana.’ ‘XIV 14. If the embodied one meets his end whilst *sattva* prevails, then he attains to the spotless worlds of the knowers of the Highest.’ ‘XIV 15. If he dies during the reign within him of *rajas*, he is born among men attached to action; and if he dies in *tamas*, he is born in species not endowed with reason.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, pp. 328–329). Knowledge is the cause of *sattva*. If *sattva* is present, spiritual knowledge is present. The flourishing of *sattva* in the individual is manifested by the presence of spiritual knowledge and is made visible by the presence of spiritual knowledge in the individual. The positivity of *sattva* clearly emerges from these statements. The negativity of *rajas* and *tamas* is likewise clear. Furthermore, the development of *sattva* is directly connected to the presence of spiritual knowledge.

<sup>10</sup> In the teachings of the *Gita*, spiritual knowledge turns out to be indispensable for the individual to arrive at a condition of purity. Spiritual knowledge represents the best factor for the purification of the soul: ‘IV 38. There is nothing in this world so purifying as Knowledge. He who is perfected by *yoga* finds it in himself in the fullness of time.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 207) If the individual wishes to reach purification, he needs the kind of knowledge transmitted by the revelation of the *Gita*.

<sup>11</sup> The *Gita* teaches that the responsibility for the presence of virtue and vice belongs to the individual: ‘V 15. The Lord does not take upon Himself anyone’s vice or virtue; it is ignorance that veils knowledge and deludes all creatures.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 216) The individual ought to take the due steps so that he can become free from ignorance.

vi) Individuals are battlefields; they have a psychic division between good factors and bad factors.

vii) The responsibility of every individual consists in strengthening the good factors and in taming the negative factors which are present in his own soul.

viii) Individuals ought to become aware of their own limits. Despite their limits, individuals do not need to despair because of their own limits; they ought to be confident in what they can actually do<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, to have limits does not mean that the individual has no duty as regards his own limits; the individual ought to act against his own limits.

ix) Individuals ought to reach knowledge and develop themselves on the basis of the knowledge which the individual is able to reach. They may not remain in a condition of ignorance, and they may not accept their inner condition as it is. The individual may not remain in a condition of passivity towards his own nature if he wishes to reach a moral foundation and moral development; he ought to act by developing sattva in himself.

#### **4) The human condition: human beings are battlefields**

As we have anticipated in the introduction, we think that one of the causes of the interest of Gandhi for the *Gita* lies in Gandhi's search for the contents of the individual's education; education consists in establishing, in the individuals, a general disposition which will make the individuals able to take the morally right decisions.

In Gandhi's view, the revelation of the *Gita* explains, among other things, that the individual condition corresponds to that of a battlefield; the

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<sup>12</sup> In Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 145, we can find the following interesting considerations regarding the possibilities connected to the individual's action: '[...] Lord Krishna distinguishes between body (not-Self) and Atman (Self) and shows that whilst bodies are impermanent and several, Atman is permanent and one. Effort is within man's control, not the fruit thereof. All he has to do, therefore, is to decide his course of conduct or duty on each occasion and persevere in it, unconcerned about the result. Fulfillment of one's duty in the spirit of detachment or selflessness leads to Freedom.' The individual ought to engage himself in the action; the engagement is in the individual's power, whereas the results of the engagement are uncertain. The individual ought to learn that only the engagement is in his power and, as a consequence, ought to concentrate himself on the engagement. Since the results do not depend on him, he should not concentrate his effort on the results.

human condition is to be compared with a battlefield in which reciprocally hostile moral potencies fight against each other. The first step for the education of the individual is to analyse his position and his condition in the reality in order to see how to change and what to do. Knowledge and self-knowledge are indispensable for the development of the individual. The individual moral starting point is not easy; the first step which the individual ought to make in order to begin a process of moral self-improvement consists in becoming aware of his complex life condition, of his composite essence, and of his divided constitution. Only through this awareness does the individual become able to understand the necessity of finding the right formation for his moral constitution.

As regards the individual moral condition, Gandhi expresses the following positions, basing his reflections on his interpretation of the general sense of the Mahabharata:

'The Mahabharata is not history; it is a *dharma-grantha*. [...] The battle described here is, therefore, a struggle between dharma and adharma. [...] the epic describes the battle ever raging between the countless Kauravas and Pandavas dwelling within us. It is a battle between the innumerable forces of good and evil which become personified in us as virtues and vices. We shall leave aside the question of violence and non-violence and say that this *dharma-grantha* was written to explain man's duty in this inner strife.'<sup>13</sup>

There is a condition of inner strife and there is a duty of the individual related to the inner strife. The condition of inner strife means that the individual can explode; this has consequences both for the individual and for society. Thanks to the epic narration, the individual can moreover understand his own duty; there is a moral message in the narration. As we can see, Gandhi interprets the Mahabharata in a metaphorical way; the battle of Mahabharata is, actually, the battle between the good and evil which are present in each individual. This means that the individuals are composed out of forces of evil and forces of good. The individual psychic condition is not void; forces of evil and of good are present in the individual. In particular, the individual has vices in himself. There are bad components with which the individual ought to reckon and which the individual ought to face in the appropriate way. The individual ought to become aware that there are negative components within himself.

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<sup>13</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 95.

The presence of evil forces within the individual means that the individual can be or become bad. As a consequence, the individual cannot remain indifferent if he wishes to reach the right moral formation and unless he wants to remain exposed to a conflict situation. From the awareness of the presence of bad components in the individual, the question arises if and how the individual can be liberated from these bad components. There is a condition of inner strife within the individual. The individual has duties in relation to this strife. The individual may not simply take notice of it; the individual ought to act in an appropriate way in relation to this strife. The individual may not resign to the presence of this strife, and he may not simply live his own condition as it is immediately given. He ought to counteract the presence of evil. The individual has and will always have precise limits for his development: he cannot eliminate these limits, but he can improve his initial condition. The components of the individual are given; the development of the individual is not given. The individual is not responsible for the components which he has; however, he is responsible for the development of his own components.

Gandhi does not stop at the consideration of the inner condition of the individual, but he adds that the Mahabharata was written in order to expose the duty of the individual in relation to his own soul. The presence of evil and of inner strife in the individual does not mean that the individual may remain passive in relation to the given situation. The individual ought to become aware of his own condition and to educate himself correspondingly. The fact that the individual has this composition does not mean that he is not responsible for his life and for his behaviour; the right moral development can be reached only through the engagement of the individual. The individual, therefore, ought to take a decision on his future moral constitution<sup>14</sup>. Since vices are present in him, the individual

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<sup>14</sup> Since the individual ought to follow the truth – as we shall see in a further passage of Gandhi’s meditation –, the individual may not avoid taking a decision as regards his condition in the world. The individual ought to follow the truth, therefore his decision ought to be in favour of the learning process, which leads the individual to the truth and to the knowledge of reality (and, consequently, to his moral transformation). Not taking any decision as regards one’s own life means taking a decision to the advantage of the evil forces, since the individual needs the due development in order to arrive at the right moral condition. The individual

ought to learn the road to the right moral formation in order to be able to limit the power of his vices. Gandhi then adds on this specific subject:

'[...] the battle-field described here is primarily the one inside the human body. [...] here the physical battle is only an occasion for describing the battle-field of the human body. In this view the names mentioned are not of persons but of qualities which they represent. What is described is the conflict within the human body between opposing moral tendencies imagined as distinct figures. [...] It is the human body that is described as Kurukshetra, as *dharma-kshetra*.'<sup>15</sup>

As we can see, the individual is constitutively internally divided in different forces which are able to produce in him virtues or vices. Mutually opposing tendencies are present in the individual. There is a conflict within the individual; the individual has in himself mutually conflicting forces. As a consequence, the individual may not remain in a state of inaction provided he really aims to reach a moral education. The individual ought to act. The responsibility begins as soon as the individual knows that he is a composed entity; the individual responsibility is to decide whether the individual wants to let virtue or vice grow in himself.

The condition of internal conflict could be externalised into the social texture. Historical phenomena, consequently, have their root, their origin, and their cause in the internal structure of the individual. The Mahabarata provides, in Gandhi's view, the explanation of the origin of the evil in the individual and in society; the evil is within the individual with all the consequences derived from this presence. This does not mean that the individual is only evil, but it means that the evil exists in the individual and, as a consequence, in the social dimension. The problem of the presence of evil in society is not to be solved unless the condition of conflict of the individual is at least limited. The correct education and development of the individual are the basis, the foundation and the presupposition for the correct order of society. No correct moral society is possible without the correct development of the individual.

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ought to develop spiritual knowledge. This knowledge will not come about by itself. The engagement of the individual is needed; a path of practice of virtues is needed.

<sup>15</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 96.

## 5) Truth, spiritual knowledge, and sattva

We would now like to consider some of Gandhi's observations on the truth and on the necessity of following the truth. The truth gives the individual the due contents and the due foundations in order that the individual can successfully develop the forces of good which are present in the individual. Gandhi expresses the following general considerations on truth:

[...] there can be no exception in the matter of following truth, for truth is God and, if exceptions were admitted in regard to it, God also would be sometimes truth and sometimes non-truth.<sup>16</sup>

This statement lies at the basis of Gandhi's research: truth, which is God, ought to be followed. Truth is to be followed by everybody; there can be no exception to the general rule. The learning process is indispensable in order that the individual is actually able to follow the truth. Learning is an indispensable aspect of the process of education of individuals. Gandhi clearly states that everyone can reach spiritual knowledge; nobody is excluded. To understand reality in all its aspects depends on spiritual knowledge:

'It is stated in the *Gita* itself that everyone, whether a woman, a Vaisya or a Sudra, can acquire spiritual knowledge if they have devotion to God. All the same, learning should not be slighted. To understand any matter, one must have the knowledge which comes from learning.'<sup>17</sup>

We can see the following contents in the following passage:

- Spiritual knowledge comes from the devotion to God.
- Spiritual knowledge is available to everybody.
- Learning is indispensable.
- The knowledge which derives from learning the contents of the revelation lies at the basis of our understanding of everything.

The devotion to God is the basis for reaching spiritual knowledge. Learning proves to be the basis for the development of the individual. Spiritual knowledge can be reached, but the learning process is necessary; spiritual knowledge constitutes the foundation for the understanding of all aspects of reality. Gandhi's general attitude towards revelation, truth, and

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<sup>16</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 96.

the individual's moral growth consists in the conviction that the knowledge of revelation modifies the mind of the individual; the meditation on the revelation will modify the individual.

The revelation acquaints the individual with another dimension of reality, i.e., with the dimension of the Divinity. Spiritual knowledge modifies the consideration of the reality which the individual has. The condition for improving *sattva* in the individual consists in developing his level of spiritual knowledge<sup>18</sup>. The possibility, for the individual, of developing the good component in himself is clearly expressed in the following statement of Gandhi:

'If a person overcomes *rajas* and *tamas*, he can create *sattva*. (All the three exist in us. We should make a special effort to cultivate that which we want to strengthen.)'<sup>19</sup>

Gandhi's intent and programme are already clear in this statement; constitutively, the three factors are within the individual; morally, the individual ought to decide which factor he wants to strengthen. The responsibility belongs to the individual. If the individual wishes to strengthen *sattva*, the individual ought to follow the learning process: the learning process enables the individual to understand his condition in the world and his duties in the world. Throughout his meditation on the *Gita*, Gandhi states that the individual can – at least up to a certain level – improve himself. There is, for the individual, no predetermination to become or to be evil. Each individual, as we shall see, is affected by limits

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<sup>18</sup> Only the individual who has improved the quality of *sattva* in himself can live with peace in mind: '*Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, the three forces or modes of *prakriti*, drive everyone to action, whether he will or no. A *tamasik* man is one who works in a mechanical fashion, a *rajasik* man is one who rides too many horses, who is restless and is always doing something or other, and the *sattvik* man is one who works with peace in his mind. One is always driven to work by one or another of these three modes of *prakriti* or by a combination of them.' (see *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 149). The individual's general orientation in life is different depending on the prevalence of the three factors within the individual. The individual behaviour depends on the factor prevailing within the individual. Knowledge is a way of living too. The presence and the absence of knowledge is decisive.

<sup>19</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 316.



as regards his moral development. These limits are due to his corporeal dimension; nonetheless, each individual can develop himself at least up to a certain level<sup>20</sup>.

One of the duties which the individual has during his corporeal life is to let *sattva* grow and to let *rajas* and *tamas* diminish; the composition which everyone finds in himself between *sattva*, *tamas*, and *rajas* should be shifted through one's own education and consequent deeds to the advantage of *sattva* and to the disadvantage of *rajas* and *tamas*. Changing the individual towards a better moral condition means creating the foundations of a better society.

## 6) Foundations

The knowledge needed for the moral development of the individual is the knowledge of the principles of reality. Gandhi is searching for the foundation of the right moral behaviour. In order to learn the contents and norms of the right behaviour, the individual needs to know his nature and his condition in the reality. The individual needs to know the structure of his own nature to see whether, how, and in which measure he can influence and modify it. This modification cannot have the necessary elements if the individual does not meditate on the revelation of the *Gita* and if the individual does not lead his learning process by following the contents of the revelation.

Gandhi is searching for a foundation of reality to find directions for political action. The possibility of coexistence in society finds its foundation in *atman* being the common essence for everybody:

'The Hindu belief in avatars may present a difficulty to some of us. Avatar means descent. Our descent means God's descent too, for He is present in

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<sup>20</sup> If the person allows *tamas* to flourish, the effect will be ignorance: 'XIV 16. The fruit of *sattvika* action is said to be stainless merit; that of *rajas* is pain and that of *tamas* ignorance.' (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 329). Only *sattva* brings about a morally positive result. *Rajas* produces pain, whereas *tamas* produces ignorance. The only remedy against ignorance is the learning process to be found in the *Gita*. The danger of ignorance is always present; if *tamas* is in the individuals, and the consequence of *tamas* is ignorance, this means that the individual can become prey to ignorance unless *sattva* is strengthened, on the one hand, and unless *rajas* and *tamas* are limited, on the other hand.

every creature and in every object<sup>21</sup>. All this is His *maya*. All concrete things—our body, the material objects, all these—exist at definite points in space and time, but the *atman* was not born in time, it pervades all space and exists through all time<sup>22</sup>. We do not know it by direct experience. If we wish to understand the principle known as God, either with the help of reason or through faith, we should first know the *atman*. What is it? So long as we live in ignorance, it is more distant than even the sky, but in our awakened state we cannot say that it is removed from us by even so much as an inch<sup>23</sup>. It is that through which we came into being and through which we exist; if you believe that you are that, then “I” and “you” are identical—but only a person devoid of egotism can assert that<sup>24</sup>. “I” and “you” are identical in the sense in which the ring and chain are in the final analysis but gold. Name and form are only for a moment; while things have them, they are no more real than a mirage. That into which things merge when they cease to have name and form is ever the same<sup>25</sup>.

And so Krishna says:

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<sup>21</sup> God is not extraneous to the entities of the world; God is present in the entities of the world.

<sup>22</sup> As we can see from Gandhi’s text, a first difference emerges between concrete things and *atman*; concrete things are enclosed in their spatial and temporal limits, whereas *atman* is not limited by any spatial or temporal limit.

<sup>23</sup> The interpretation of reality which the individual gives in an ignorant spiritual condition is completely different from the interpretation of reality which the individual gives when the individual has reached an enlightened spiritual condition.

<sup>24</sup> If a person is not devoid of egotism, she is attached to the ego; consequently, she is not able to acknowledge that there are no differences between individuals. She is and will remain attached to an interpretation of the individuals as mutually separated entities, and she will not be able to see the individuals as particular concretisations of the same entity, i.e., of *atman*.

<sup>25</sup> *Atman* is the permanent structure of the concrete entities; therefore, *atman* is the foundation and the very nature of the things themselves. The dimension of the plurality of independent things turns out to be, on a closer inspection, only a transitory appearance. Concrete things interpreted as a plurality of mutually separated things prove to be only a mirage. Thus, to interpret the plurality of things as the authentic dimension of the reality amounts to confusing the appearance with the authentic reality.

“Though I was never born in time, though I am the Lord of all creatures, I incarnate Myself and am born as a human being<sup>26</sup>.”

This is the essential nature of the *atman*<sup>27</sup>. If we realize this truth, we would always act in conformity with that nature<sup>28</sup>; we then act, though

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<sup>26</sup> The intervention of Krishna in the world is due to the prevalence of Evil in the world. Krishna intervenes when Evil tends to prevail in the reality: ‘IV 7. For whenever Right declines and Wrong prevails, then O Bharata, I come to birth.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 193) God intervening in the reality is proof of the moral insufficiency of individuals. Since, at least in certain periods of history, Right declines, God, as a consequence of the moral worsening of the individual’s moral condition, intervenes. There are, therefore, periods of history in which individuals degenerate as regards their moral level. Individuals are not able to solve the decline of Right by themselves; God’s intervention is therefore needed. The aim of Krishna consists in the reaffirmation of Right: ‘IV 8. To save the righteous, to destroy the wicked, and to re-establish Right I am born from age to age.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 193) Gandhi comments on this passage in the following way: ‘Here is comfort for the faithful and affirmation of the truth that Right ever prevails. An eternal conflict between Right and Wrong goes on. Sometimes the latter seems to get the upper hand, but it is Right which ultimately prevails. The good are never destroyed, for Right—which is Truth—cannot perish; the wicked are destroyed because Wrong has no independent existence. Knowing this let man cease to arrogate to himself authorship and eschew untruth, violence and evil. Inscrutable Providence—the unique power of the Lord—is ever at work. This in fact is *avatara*, incarnation. Strictly speaking there can be no birth for God.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 193) God is not an extra-worldly entity; God is not an entity which is completely extraneous to reality, in general, and to the dimension of the individuals, in particular. God incarnates Himself and intervenes in the reality of human beings when Right becomes weaker, and Wrong becomes stronger. Therefore, God, at least on some occasions of particular gravity, leads the dimension of the individuals. As regards the relationships between men and divine, it is interesting what Gandhi says as a comment on the *Bhagavad Gita* IV 12: ‘Gods, as indicated before, must not be taken to mean the heavenly beings of tradition, but whatever reflects the divine. In that sense man is also a god. Steam, electricity and the other great forces of Nature are all gods. Propitiation of these forces quickly bears fruit, as we well know, but it is short-lived. It fails to bring comfort to the soul and it certainly does not take one even a short step towards salvation.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 196)

born as human beings, as if we were never born. If the *atman* in each of us is identical with the *atman* in everyone else, one *atman* born in a body means all of them born, and all others born means that one born too. This is a difficult idea to grasp. “This is *maya*,” says Shri Krishna, “and through it I incarnate Myself in this world time and again.”

We can follow reason only up to a point. What, then, does avatar mean? It is not as if God comes down from above. It would be right to say, if we can say it without egotism<sup>29</sup>, that each one of us is an avatar<sup>30</sup>. The *atman* in every body is as potent as the *atman* in any other, though outwardly we see differences. In our awakened state all are one, though in our ignorant state we may seem separate existences<sup>31</sup>. In real truth, there are not several, there is only one<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Gandhi seems to interpret atman and God as the same entity. Moreover, following a non-dualistic interpretation of reality, Gandhi identifies the individuals with atman. Furthermore, he extends the status of avatar to all the individuals.

<sup>28</sup> From the recognition of the contents of the truth, the individual would act in conformity with the contents of the truth; to understand the truth means acting immediately in conformity with the truth. *Gita's* teaching transmits norms for the right individual behaviour. The presupposition for arriving at the knowledge of these norms is the individual's will to meditate on the *Gita* and to learn the truth. The individual ought to be ready to engage himself in the activity of learning the contents of the revelation.

<sup>29</sup> This insertion sounds like a kind of admonishment. The fact that all individuals are avatars of God may not lead the individuals to any feeling of egotism; the individual may not have self-admiration, vanity, or self-centredness because he is an avatar of God.

<sup>30</sup> Gandhi does not limit the notion and condition of avatar only to Krishna; he assigns the condition of avatar to all individuals. All individuals without exception are avatars of God. This is the root of all individuals; they appear to be separated from each other, but, actually, they are a unity.

<sup>31</sup> To be noted is the difference between appearance and reality; it seems that individuals have a mutually separate existence; actually, all individuals are one entity.

<sup>32</sup> The knowledge of atman is the condition of liberation from the condition of ignorance. The specific knowledge which frees from ignorance is the knowledge of atman. The knowledge of the structure of reality and of the condition of the individual in the reality gives the needed orientation, but it is always the individual who ought to decide on his own life direction. Choice and responsibility belong to the individual. ‘V 16. But to them whose ignorance is destroyed by the

If we constantly reflect over this essence named the *atman*, we shall regard no one as an enemy to be killed and shall have nothing to get angry about<sup>33</sup>. We shall then see that anyone who hits us hits himself too.’<sup>34</sup>

As previously alluded to, the passage represents the foundation for the consideration of all individuals as being one and the same entity. The common nature of *atman* is the foundation of the connection between living beings. Since individuals are mutually connected through the common nature of *atman*, since their authentic essence is *atman*, for an individual to commit injustice against other persons means, actually, committing injustice against himself. Thus, the common nature of *atman* represents the foundation of the individual’s solidarity with the other beings<sup>35</sup>. The foundation of good behaviour lies in the truth of reality and in the structure of reality; the knowledge of the structure of reality gives the foundation and the programme of the individual’s good behaviour. The fact that all individuals are, actually, only one entity implies, for the individuals, that they ought to consider themselves as being *atman*, i.e., as

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knowledge of *Atman*, this their knowledge, like the sun, reveals the Supreme.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 218) This kind of knowledge gives the moral formation: ‘V 17. Those whose intellect is suffused with That, whose self has become one with That, who abide in That, and whose end and aim is That, wipe out their sins with knowledge, and go whence there is no return.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 218) The knowledge frees the individual from the sins and from the transmigration of the soul.

<sup>33</sup> The authentic nature of every individual is *atman*. Since *atman* is common to all individuals, there is no authentic separation between individuals, and there is no real enemy.

<sup>34</sup> We quoted some sentences of this passage at the beginning of this investigation (see *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)*, pp. 188–189).

<sup>35</sup> The knowledge of *atman* gives the due formation for becoming free from lust and from wrath: ‘V 26. Rid of lust and wrath, masters of themselves, the ascetics who have realized *Atman* find oneness with *Brahman* everywhere around them.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 222) The reached due moral composition of the soul makes the individual able to become master of his own self. ‘VI 7. Of him who has conquered himself and who rests in perfect calm the self is completely composed, in cold and heat, in pleasure and pain, in honour and dishonour.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 228)

being manifestations of atman. If they remained in the consideration of themselves as separate entities, they would refuse to reckon with God's revelation. Since the essence of everybody is atman, all individuals have the same essence; there is, actually, no separation between individuals. There is no enemy.

The process of learning the foundations of reality is necessary for the individual so that he can arrive at the knowledge of his own condition. The individual cannot remain in the condition in which he is born if he wishes to reach due moral development. The individual ought then to orientate his behaviour through the knowledge which he has reached. Moreover, the fact that each individual is an avatar of God entails that every individual is – at least partially – a spiritual entity; since every individual is atman, every individual cannot be reduced to corporeal elements. Every individual is as such, actually, something other than corporeal components. Since every individual is, in his own nature, an avatar of God, he ought to develop spiritual factor in himself and limit his other elements. Since all individuals share the common nature of atman, reciprocal agreement, on the one hand, and not mutual discord and disagreement, on the other hand, ought to be the guiding principles prevailing within the members of society<sup>36</sup>. Hence, the authentic foundation of human nature proves to be the principle of the correct behaviour for the individual and for society.

The comprehension that there is no separate existence is a turning point in the life of the individual. The individual ought to understand that the reality which he immediately has before himself is only appearance. A way of education is needed for the individual to see the reality as it is and not as it appears. Through the revelation of Krishna, the individual transcends history and experience; therefore, he acquires a different orientation towards history and experience in comparison with the orientation which he had before. The general life orientation of the individual in the reality before the revelation of the *Gita* is completely

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<sup>36</sup> This attitude could be extended to the relationships between countries too. The detachment from the ego means and implies detachment from any attitude of separation between the individuals. The detachment from the attitude of separation and the corresponding attitude of unification of all individuals in atman can function as an alternative against all the attitudes supporting a condition of separation between entities.

different from the general life orientation of the individual in the reality after this revelation.

Revelation is, for the individual, the road of transcendence of the particularity of his own position. By reaching the awareness that he is atman and that likewise every individual is atman, the individual becomes able to transcend the particularity of his own condition. The individual transcends the specific situation in which he is living, since he arrives at the understanding that plurality is only appearance. Thus, the individual is transformed through the acquisition of the knowledge of reality into an entity which is different from the entity which he originally was, since his outlook on reality has completely changed. The individual changes through the *Gita*. The individual transcends reality as regards the way in which reality is given. His consideration of reality is completely different from the initial way of interpreting reality. There is an individual before the revelation and an individual after the revelation. For the enlightened individual, reality ceases to be the dimension of the here and now and the dimension of the particularities; the enlightened individual can recognise the presence of atman in everybody and the universal reality in everything. All reality thus becomes for him a unity; the individual is now able to see that reality is a unity.

The principle of non-violence, too, has its own foundation in the revelation, as we can see in the following passage:

‘One should see oneself in the whole world and the world in oneself, and act towards others accordingly. The ideal of non-violence also had its origin in this realization that, when human life as such is full of suffering, we should cause suffering to none’<sup>37</sup>.

Only spiritual knowledge and the process of learning can give the individual the right way of education. Without the sphere of truth, without assimilation to the contents obtained through this process, the individual cannot be in the condition to organise his behaviour on the basis of the illumination given by truth. Only truth can give the individual the instructions for correct behaviour, but the process of attaining truth presupposes an apprenticeship in knowledge and education.

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<sup>37</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 270.

## 7) Limits of individuals and responsibility of individuals

As anticipated, Gandhi insists on the limits of the individual. The individual is not a perfect entity; every individual has, constitutively, defects, which can be certainly limited and diminished, but which, nonetheless, cannot be completely eliminated, since they belong to the nature as such of every individual. The fact that the individual is constituted by the senses, whose influence is one of the main hindrances to his own elevating to the truth, can be limited, but cannot be eliminated:

[...] the cravings of the senses die away only when we cease to exist in the body<sup>38</sup>. This is a terrible statement to make, but the *Gita* does not shrink from stating terrible truths. Truth does not remain hidden because it is not stated. *Moksha* is the supreme end, and even yogis can experience it only in contemplation. We must, therefore, say that the Dweller in the body cannot be free while He dwells in it. The prisoner is in jail and the king promises him that he will be released; but till he is actually released he cannot be said to have come out of cage.

He can only imagine his condition after release. In the same way, if there is anyone waiting to receive and greet the *atman* on its release, he cannot do that as long as it remains imprisoned in this cage of the body. And this cannot but be so. How can it be otherwise than that the state after release will be different from the state before it?

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<sup>38</sup> The sphere of the sense perception is the sphere which transmits instability to the individual: 'II 14. O Kaunteya! contacts of the senses with their objects bring cold and heat, pleasure and pain; they come and go and are transient. Endure them, O Bharata.' (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 148) The feelings originating in the sense perception represent only something instable. *Gita's* teaching on this subject is that the individual ought to withstand them. The joys connected to the senses have only negative aspects: 'V 22. For the joys derived from sense-contacts are nothing but mines of misery; they have beginning and end, O Kaunteya; the wise man does not revel therein.' (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 220) The right formation ought to teach the individual to become indifferent to lust and wrath. The individual who has reached the right education is able to stand firm against lust and wrath: 'V 23. The man who is able even here on earth, ere he is released from the body, to hold out against the flood-tide of lust and wrath, – he is a *yogi*, he is happy.' (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 221) In general, it is the sphere of the senses and of the feelings which represents the instability factor of the individuals.



Truth is so profound and great a thing that, as we think more and more about it, we realize that to have a direct experience of it, we should completely shed our attachment to the body and yearn every moment for *moksha*. As we think of *moksha* in this light, its value in our eyes should daily increase. If it is the most important thing in life, it should be clear to us that it cannot be attained while we live in this body. Till the gate of the body prison<sup>39</sup> has opened, the fragrance of *moksha* is beyond our experience. Whether terrible or not, this is the truth.<sup>40</sup>

Moksha is the supreme end of the individual. The earthen life is compared to a jail, to a cage. The individual is a prisoner. In spite of the fact that the truth which expresses the individual condition is hard, the individual ought to learn it and ought to accept it. Gandhi pleads for the knowledge of the truth despite its hardness. To know the truth is necessary in order to be aware of one's own limits. The release from the senses can take place only after the end of the corporeal existence. The condition of moksha cannot be reached as long as the individual lives in the body.

The cravings of the senses disturb the individual. The senses are always present in the individual; the individual constitution is condemned to be disturbed by the senses as long as the individual is in the corporeal dimension. Even for yogis, the condition of moksha is a condition which can be reached only through contemplation. Moksha is reachable during the corporeal life only by yogis, provided that yogis are in the condition of contemplation. The individual cannot remain in the condition of contemplation during the corporeal life. Therefore, moksha is not a condition which the individual can reach in a stable way during the corporeal life. There is no way of liberation from the influence of the senses during the corporeal life. The individual ought to take notice and be aware of his own limits.

To have limits, though, does not mean that the individual has no duty as regards the development of his own personality. The positive condition for the individual is to be free from bodily influences. Therefore,

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<sup>39</sup> The language used by Gandhi in this passage is important. He asserts that the dweller of the body cannot be free as long as he dwells in the body; he speaks of the corporeal dimension as a cage, and he describes the body as a prison. The individual is described as a prisoner in jail.

<sup>40</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 137.

the individual ought to try to become as next as possible to the condition of absence of corporeal dimensions. The limits present in the individual corporeal condition can teach the subject to be as next as possible to the condition in which the subject will be without the body. If to be without the body is to be free from the influence of the body, if the positive condition is to be without the body, then the individual ought to try to imitate this condition by trying to detach himself from the body as much as possible. The individual's attachment to the body ought to become weaker and weaker.

The truth cannot be reached as long as the individuals are bound to the body. This is a precise limit which the individual has; in the same way, the fact that the individuals are in the corporeal dimension entails that the individuals have some form of violence in themselves:

'The only way of rising to this state beyond the three *gunas* is to cultivate the *sattvik* quality, for in order to rise to that state one is required to cultivate the virtues of fearlessness, humility, sincerity, and so on. So long as we live in the body, there is some evil, some violence. The most, therefore, that we can do is to be *sattvik* in the highest degree possible.

The state beyond the three *gunas* can only be imagined. It does not seem possible to maintain it in action. In concrete action, our state must be *sattvik* in the highest degree<sup>41</sup>. We cannot say even of a seemingly perfect man that he has risen beyond the three *gunas*. We can only say that he seems to be like one who has so risen.'<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The state which is beyond the three *gunas* cannot be maintained in action. During the state of action, the best condition which can be reached is to be *sattvik* in the highest degree. The condition of action is not appropriate for the individual going beyond the *gunas*.

<sup>42</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 320. The condition of going beyond the three *gunas* is described in the following passage too: 'It is stated, it is true, that a good man will not be born again, but only if he rises above the plane of *gunas*. There is, beyond the *gunas* of good and evil, a state which is characterized by no *guna*. It is not an undesirable state, but a desirable one. It is the state of *moksha*, a state which endures for ever.' (see *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 192) The condition of *sattva*, too, ought to be surpassed. *Gunas* regard the corporeal dimension of the individual; the individual ought to try to go beyond his corporeal dimension.

The more the individuals are limited, the more the individuals ought to educate themselves. The individual is condemned to have some form of violence in himself because of his corporeal dimension as such. The individual cannot be free constitutively from all forms of violence as long as he is in the corporeal dimension. He ought to cultivate the virtues connected to *sattva* in order that the balance existing in him among *sattva*, *tamas*, and *rajas* can be shifted to the advantage of *sattva*; *sattva* will therewith increase, whereas *tamas* and *rajas* will correspondingly diminish<sup>43</sup>. Nonetheless, even in the possibly best condition of development for *sattva* in the individual's soul, both *tamas* and *rajas*, which are constitutively present in the individual, will not completely disappear:

'We can make as many categories as we like. The intention was to show that the reign of the three *gunas* prevails throughout the universe. A cooking or other utensil is an inert object, but it contains air inside; likewise, everything is pervaded by the spirit. Existing apart from the three *gunas* is God. We have to merge in Him. Even if we cultivate the *sattvik* qualities to their highest perfection in us, something of *rajasik* and *tamasik* will remain. But, without worrying ourselves about this, we should continue to strive and cultivate finer and finer *sattvik* qualities in us, for the impulses which agitate us the least and consume the least amount of our energy are *sattvik* impulses.'<sup>44</sup>

Gandhi insists that elements of *rajas* and of *tamas* will remain in the individual. *Tamas* and *rajas* are not completely eliminable as long as the individual is in the corporeal dimension. Only God is beyond the three *gunas*. The individual is composed of the three *gunas*. Therefore, the individual cannot completely eliminate the *gunas* in himself; he cannot go completely beyond them during his corporeal life. His aim ought to be to

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<sup>43</sup> Only by following *sattva* can the individual develop himself: 'XIV 17. Of *sattva* knowledge is born, of *rajas*, greed; of *tamas*, heedlessness, delusion and ignorance.' 'XIV 18. Those abiding in *sattva* rise upwards, those in *rajas* stay midway, those in *tamas* sink downwards.' (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi* pp. 329–330). The state of knowledge comes about only through *sattva*. Only through *sattva* can the individual improve his position within the reality.

<sup>44</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 336.

merge with God, even though there are limits connected to his own condition.

In spite of the fact that negative components will always be present in the individual, the individual ought to continue his work of self-improvement. The fact that the individuals are constitutively imperfect beings entails that individuals ought to educate themselves continuously. The individual ought to reach the moral foundation, but nothing is reached once and for all within the corporeal dimension<sup>45</sup>. Individuals being limited does not mean absence of duties or freedom from responsibilities; on the contrary, individuals have the duty of learning and have the responsibility of fighting against their own limits. To become aware of one's own limits is to become aware that one's own limits ought to be fought against. Hence, being limited does not exempt the individual from duties and responsibilities. Individuals ought to steadily pay attention to the stability and endurance of their moral character; individuals ought to try to reach, maintain, and strengthen it. Gandhi clearly expresses that the individual cannot manage, in the corporeal dimension, to fully follow ahimsa:

'It is impossible in this body to follow ahimsa fully<sup>46</sup>. That is why *moksha* is laid down as the supreme end of life. Violence is inescapable. [...] Evil is inherent in action, the *Gita* says further on.'<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The following passage of the *Gita* can give us elements for the understanding of the qualities which the individual ought to develop: 'XVI 1. Fearlessness, purity of hearth, steadfastness in *jnana* and *yoga* – knowledge and action, beneficence, self-restraint, sacrifice, spiritual study, austerity, and uprightness; [...] XVI 2. Non-violence, truth, slowness to wrath, the spirit of dedication, serenity, aversion to slander, tenderness to all that lives, freedom from greed, gentleness, modesty, freedom from levity; [...] XVI 3. Spiritedness, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, freedom from ill will and arrogance – these are to be found in one born with the divine heritage, O Bharata.' (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 343). The complex of the virtues which an individual ought to cultivate and follow is, as we can see, very great.

<sup>46</sup> Gandhi is confident that human beings have the capability of reaching progressive degrees in the knowledge of the good. He is confident in the consequent maturation of the capability of becoming *sattvik*. He is nonetheless aware that, in spite of all efforts which human beings could ever fulfil, human beings have limitations connected to their being corporeal as such. Confidence in one's own capabilities and awareness of one's own limitations are two main

There are clear limits put on the human capabilities. Despite all efforts, elements of violence and evil will remain both in the individual's soul and in the individual's action. As regards the possibility to follow and to realise ahimsa in a complete and perfect way, Gandhi clearly states that this realisation is not possible for human beings. Everyone ought to become aware of one's own limitations; in the corporeal dimension, it is not possible to concretise a perfect doctrine of ahimsa in one's own self. This point, of course, may not lead to refraining from trying to realise ahimsa as best as possible; on the contrary, the awareness of one's own defects ought to lead everyone to multiply the efforts towards the realisation of ahimsa. The individual ought both to be aware of his own limitations and to act against these limitations; far from being an excuse for him, the awareness of his limitations leads to an exhortation of developing his nature so that his limitations exercise as little influence as possible. The presence of limitations in the individual cannot lead the individual to a condition of indifference; the individual is called to realise the good factors of his soul. The fact that he cannot reach perfection may not exempt him from being attentive to the improvement of his own nature.

In spite of the individual limitations, it should not be forgotten that Gandhi insists on the individual duties and on the responsibility deriving from the presence and existence of the individual duties. Each individual has the responsibility and the duty as well to improve himself morally; nobody is allowed to say that she/he cannot reach spiritual knowledge and the corresponding level of moral growth (and of moral education). If the individual wants to improve himself, he can too. The fact that the individual is not perfect does not mean that the individual cannot become better than he is originally.

One of the remedies against the presence of evil forces in the individual is represented by the detachment from the ego. The attachment to the ego can only bring about a false orientation in life, since the ego imprisons the individual in a limited dimension. The root of the possibility of the right moral behaviour lies in the abandonment of the ego; the

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concepts, i.e., are two main fountains of inspiration, which often come to the surface throughout Gandhi's discussion of the *Gita*.

<sup>47</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 106.

morally right decisions can be taken only after the individual's detachment from the ego. Gandhi is clear about the necessity of abandoning the ego:

'Krishna is the *atman* in us, who is our charioteer. We can win only if we hand over the reins of the chariot to him. God makes us dance, like the master in a puppet show. We are smaller than even puppets. We should, therefore, trust everything to God, as children to parents. Let us not eat uncooked stuff. Let Krishna the cook prepare and give us what food of grace He wills for our *atman*.

The *Gita* does not decide for us. But if, whenever faced with a moral problem, you give up attachment to the ego and then decide what you should do, you will come to no harm. This is the substance of the argument which Shri Krishna has expanded into 18 chapters.'<sup>48</sup>

The *Gita* does not decide for us; individuals are autonomous. They have free will and free choice. Therefore, the Divinity reveals the essence of the reality, but the Divinity does not choose for the individual.

To renounce the attachment to the ego implies to be able to adopt a universal point of view, since the new dimension of the individual is no longer restricted in the limitation of the individuality. Until the individual remains enchained in his own self, the individual will not be able to reach a point of view which is compatible with the other ones. The ego separates the individuals from each other; the road to the morally right behaviour consists in the detachment from the ego and in the recognition of the common nature of *atman*. The common nature of *atman* proves to be the foundation of the right behaviour; the awareness and recognition of the common nature of *atman* unite the different individuals with each other. The abandonment of one's own self is liberation towards the truth:

'[...] one will not shed the sense of "I" and "mine" till one has attained knowledge. One can attain self-realization only if one sheds this attachment to the ego. [...] We can follow truth only in the measure that we shed our attachment to the ego.'<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 109.

<sup>49</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), pp. 106–107. There is a clear separation and opposition between the sphere of the senses and the sphere of reason. The level of truth can be grasped only by reason. The senses are not appropriate instruments for the understanding of the superior level of reality. If the individual can arrive at that level of reality, the individual

Truth can be followed only if the attachment to the ego becomes weaker. Following truth proves to be incompatible with the attachment to the ego.

### **8) The dangers represented by the attachment to the ego and by influence of the senses**

In the individual, there can be a conflict between mind and senses. In general, the attachment to the senses is a danger for the person:

‘A pleasure-loving man wastes his time in aimless wandering; he must have new suits of clothes every day, he eats and drinks what pleases his palate and goes about dressed in finery. If one of his pleasure-loving senses is so undisciplined that it seeks gratification anywhere and anyhow and if his mind is totally enslaved by this one sense, it will drag his intellect behind it as the wind drives a ship before it in the sea and wrecks it on a rock or runs it aground. Thus the man whose senses are completely out of his control and whose mind is totally enslaved by one of them will be ruined through gradual stages explained earlier as the consequences of attachment. If the mind is enslaved by even a single sense, one is lost.’<sup>50</sup>

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will not lose the contact with the truth. That level can be arrived at only through reason. ‘VI 21. Where he experiences that endless bliss beyond the senses which can be grasped by reason alone; wherein established he swerves not from the Truth.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 231) The effect on the individual of reaching the new dimension is to reach an inner calm. ‘VI 25. With reason held securely by the will, he should gradually attain calm and with the mind established in *Atman* think of nothing.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 233) A process of purification from the wanderings of the mind is needed for the individual to reach *atman*. ‘VI 26. Wherever the fickle and unsteady mind wanders, thence should it be reined in and brought under the sole sway of *Atman*.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 233) The knowledge consists in the apprehension of the nature of the *atman*: ‘XIII 11. Settled conviction of the nature of the *Atman*, perception of the goal of the knowledge of Truth,– All this is declared to be Knowledge and the reverse of it is ignorance.’ (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 315)

<sup>50</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 142. The text quotes then the following passage from the *Bhagavad Gita*, II 68 and II 69: ‘Therefore, O Mahabahu, he whose senses are reined in on all sides from their objects, is the man of secure understanding.’; ‘When it is night for all other beings, the disciplined soul is awake; when all other beings are awake, it is night for the seeing ascetic.’ (see also Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to*

The senses are the enemies of the mind. The example given by Gandhi is illuminating; if the mind is enslaved by senses such as the pleasure-loving ones, the mind will never be free. Gandhi clearly states that senses are a danger:

'He who lives his senses no longer subject to attachments and aversions and perfectly under his control becomes fit for God's grace. [...]

What is the natural work of the ear? We describe a man as established in *samadhi* when his *atman* abides in serene content in itself. His senses must be under his perfect control. The ears of a man whose mind has become one-pointed must have become the servants of his *atman*. Actually, however, we are the slaves of our senses. From this slavery we must win *swaraj* for the *atman*. The ears should in fact listen only to the divine music of the *atman*. They would not, then, hear even the loud beating of drums. While the *atman* dwells in this body, it should live as the latter's master and god, and use the senses to do only their natural work.'<sup>51</sup>

Gandhi points out that the individual ought to change his condition. From the slavery of the senses, the individual ought to arrive at the government of *atman*. Individuals are initially slaves of their own senses; they must free themselves from this slavery reaching a condition of government of *atman*. *Atman* ought to substitute the senses as regards the direction of the mind. Gandhi seems to individuate a dualism between mind and senses; there is at least the possibility that the senses influence the mind. Senses are not immediately under the control of the mind; they can invade the mind. The influence of the senses and the corporeal dimension brings the individual away from *atman* and from truth, since the senses individualise the person. The senses and the corporeal dimension represent a hindrance for the individual; they enslave and enclose the individual into a limited, particular dimension. Individuals are slaves of their senses. The duty of the

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*Gandhi*, p. 166) The second quotation of the *Gita* is commented in Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 166, in the following way: 'This verse indicates the divergent paths of the disciplined ascetic and sensual man. Whereas the ascetic is dead to the things of the world and lives in God, the sensual man is alive only to the things of the world and dead to the things of the spirit.' There is a complete difference between the ascetic man and the sensual man. The ascetic man lives in God; the sensual man ignores God and directs his attention exclusively to the things of the world.

<sup>51</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 139.



individual and the road of development of the individual consists in the coming back to atman. Atman, not the sense dimension, ought to direct the individual. The government of atman ought and needs to be reached. If atman governs the individual, the individual is governed by himself, since the very nature of the individual is atman. The government of atman over the individual proves to be, on closer inspection, self-government of the individual<sup>52</sup>. The self-governance of the individual begins from his becoming aware of his being essentially atman; it goes ahead with the individual fulfilment of the process of letting his life be conducted by Atman and ends up in the individual's bringing his new condition into the social dimension. Self-governance begins with the relation of the individual to atman<sup>53</sup>.

To have control of the sense-dimension is the first, indispensable step to direct one's own mind to atman<sup>54</sup>. If the influence of the senses is at least

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<sup>52</sup> Correspondingly, the government of the senses within the individual is the government of an external factor since the nature of the individual is, actually, atman. To come back to atman represents, for the individual, to return to his own nature.

<sup>53</sup> Gandhi is bringing the root of swaraj into a transcendent dimension. The first form of swaraj concerns the individual and the individual's relations both with his senses, – i.e., with his whole corporeal dimension – and with his essence, i.e., with atman. We can read the following contents in the *Bhagavad Gita*: 'III 43. Thus realizing Him to be subtler than the reason, and controlling the self by the Self (*Atman*), destroy, O Mahabahu, this enemy – Lust, so hard to overcome.' (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 189). Gandhi's comment on this passage is as follows: 'When man realizes Him, his mind will be under His control, not swayed by the senses. And when the mind is conquered, what power has Lust? It is indeed a subtle enemy, but when once the senses, the mind and the reason are under the control of the subtlest Self, Lust is extinguished.' (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, p. 189).

<sup>54</sup> It is true that the individual ought to improve sattva in himself. Nonetheless, the improvement of sattva is not the final point, since the individual ought to try to go beyond sattva itself. Sattva is also a quality binding the individual to the body: 'XIV 5. *Sattva, rajas* and *tamas* are the *gunas* sprung from *prakriti*; it this they, O Mahabahu, that keep the imperishable Dweller bound to the body.' (see Desai, *The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi*, pp. 326–327; the passage is also quoted in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)*, p. 315). Hence, the improvement of sattva represents only a stage of

partially limited, and the bounds of the ego are also partially limited, the individual will be transferred into a condition which transcends the limits imposed by the senses. The road to atman is the road out of the particularity connected to the individuality. The self-government of the individual has precise political consequences, since it means the abandonment of the separation between individuals.

Reaching atman ought to be the target of the individual. The individual ought to be aware that his position is, at the beginning of his life, a disadvantaged one; the senses and, generally, the corporeal dimension represent a dangerous hindrance for the individual and for his moral development. Senses can enslave and enclose the individual into a limited dimension. To have control of the sense dimension is, therefore, for the individual, the first indispensable step in order that he can reach atman.

## 9) Conclusions

We shall now conclude our remarks with a quotation of Gandhi's text which connects firmness of mind and satyagraha:

'The *Bhagavad Gita* says that women, Vaisyas and Sudras, all classes of people, can win freedom. In the same way, all of us can do this. Whether or not we are stout and well-fed, we can do this work if we are strong in mind. Let us, therefore, cultivate firmness of mind; if we do not let the senses distract the mind, we can become fit for satyagraha.'<sup>55</sup>

The condition for reaching satyagraha lies in the education of the mind. In order to be able to be fit for satyagraha, the individuals ought to reach the condition of firmness of mind; this condition can be reached only through the meditation on the revelation and through the consequent assimilation to the truth. The foundation of the whole behaviour of the individual and, in particular, of the morally right behaviour of the individual depends on the meditation on revelation and on the change in himself produced by the knowledge of revelation. For the individual to reach a new dimension, the individual needs truth. The foundations which are transmitted through the *Gita* are in Gandhi's interpretation, for instance, the following:

- Atman is the common essence of the individuals.

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preparation for a further passage of the road of development of the individual: in this passage, the individual merges in atman.

<sup>55</sup> See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), p. 141.

- There are no separate existences of the individuals.
- The separateness of existence is only appearance.
- The individuals ought to recognise that atman is their common essence. They ought to acknowledge that they all are one entity.
- The individuals ought to detach themselves from their own ego by acknowledging atman as their common essence.
- The individual ought to put himself under the government of atman by separating himself as much as possible from the influence of his corporeal dimension, of his senses, and of his own ego.
- The authentic place of the individual is the revelation. The revelation is the key to the individual's moral development.

These foundations are both the foundation for the individual's moral behaviour and for political action. The foundations of the right political action need the contents of the revelation, since only the contents of the revelation make available, through and thanks to God's own manifestation throughout the *Gita*, the foundational elements of the knowledge of the order of reality, of the place of the individuals in the reality, of the human condition, of the right way of relationships between individuals and reality, and of the right moral behaviour of individuals. The common nature of atman is a general law of reality which can then be applied to the particular political circumstances, problems, and controversies. The individual's recognition of the common nature of atman implies the abandonment of the ego; it implies the beginning of a change of attitude towards reality and of change of the behaviour of the individual.

Of course, the *Gita* cannot give the answer to the specific problems of politics, but it can give the due disposition on how to handle the particular problems and questions of politics; the common nature of atman of all individuals, for instance, could not justify any strategy of marginalisation or of exclusion of persons and groups, since marginalisation would amount to going against this common belonging.

Gandhi is clear both as regards the authentic aims of the individual life, i.e., to strengthen sattva in himself, and as regards the individual responsibility to strengthen sattva in himself. Rajas and tamas ought to be kept under control; creating sattva ought to be the moral aim of the individual life. The individual is not immediately a complete entity as regards his own nature. The individual's components are given, but the evolution of the components depends on the individual choice; the individual is a dynamic, not a static entity. The development of the

individual is a matter of individual responsibility and of individual choice. Therefore, the development of education lies at the basis of the moral improvement of the individuals and, consequently, at the basis of the moral improvement of the whole society.

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