

# GANDHI'S WISDOM

*Insights from the Founding Father  
of Modern Psychology in the East*

Edited by **V.K. Kool & Rita Agrawal**



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V. K. Kool · Rita Agrawal  
Editors

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Insights from the Founding Father of  
Modern Psychology in the East

palgrave  
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-030-87490-2

ISBN 978-3-030-87491-9 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87491-9>

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Cover illustration: wpap

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# Preface

Plagued as the twenty first century globe is with insurmountable problems, utmost wisdom seems to be our only hope. Humankind, though at the apex of phylogeny, has played havoc with Nature, bringing in its wake, innumerable crises, both at the environmental level and at the interpersonal level. Our search for wisdom, or, if we may dare to say so, authentic wisdom, continues, with scholars from a variety of disciplines urging us forward and providing momentum. It is but natural that psychology, as the science of human behavior, bears equal if not greater responsibility in this endeavor. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the half clad Indian, regarded by many as the wisest man to step on earth, provides many a clue. The need is to delve deeply into his life and work.

Gandhi is well known for his contribution to peace, justice, and nonviolence, leading to the independence of India (currently the largest democracy in the world), for sowing the seeds of freedom in South Africa, and overall, for giving shape to what we now know as “organized nonviolence” around the globe. There have been no dearth of scholars who had studied him during his life time, and many continue to do so, drawing from his wisdom in the hope of weaving the tapestry of

harmonious and peaceful coexistence. In fact, more than 5000 scholarly books have been written on Gandhi's life and work. However, with a few exceptions, for example, Erikson's Pulitzer Award winning book, *Gandhi's Truth* (1969), there have been almost negligible attempts to scientifically study the ways through which Gandhi helped us internalize, and put in tandem, not only the core human psychological framework of cognition, motivation and emotion, but also to explore how they can be made congruous with people and things around us.

In our two-volume book, *Gandhi and the psychology of nonviolence* (Kool & Agrawal, 2020), we invited readers to view Gandhi's life and works from the lens of scientific, modern psychology and how it has the potential to be used across various sub-fields, both traditional, such as social and community psychology, and those that are relatively new, such as psychology of technology. While we did mention Gandhi's wisdom in that book, it was only as a passing reference at the end of the second volume.

There have been significant developments since then, including but not limited to, discussions regarding having a commonly agreed conceptualization of wisdom among psychologists (for example, a recent international conference in Canada). Further, there have been invitations to genuinely explore the scientific roots of nonviolence in the context of Gandhi (for example, Nagler's Third Harmony and Cortland's core belief in the success of nonviolent methods). Added to the above are developments in the study of human cognition (for example, Kahneman's Prospect Theory—slow and fast thinking and its applications; Nobel Laureate Thaler's nudging and boosting); neuropsychological researches in the study of self control; advances in the understanding of empathy and its neurological basis (for example, 'Gandhi' neurons); neurological findings regarding relevant brain areas and its neuro-circuitry; evidence regarding the evolutionary basis of nonviolence and its concomitants and a much greater awareness regarding the importance of nonviolent methods for resolving conflict (through the empirical findings of Chenoweth and Stephan, for example). Moreover, there are psychology's new empirical endeavors in such nuanced forms of behavior as vows, silence, sacrifice and fasting, all of them being integral parts of Gandhi's behavior contributing to the experiencing of wisdom in the

context of nonviolence. And, can we disregard the growing consensus among eminent thinkers (such as Paul Krutzen, Martin Rees and Chris Rapley) on the “enormity of humanity’s responsibility as stewards of the earth” during the current epoch of the anthropocene or the emphasis being laid by world bodies such as the United Nations regarding the role of humans in global warming, climate change and the creation of a sustainable ecology?

This book is about the missing link between Gandhi’s wisdom, the inspiration we can draw from him to solve the problems of this century, and the practice of authentic wisdom. Psychologists have been mentioning ‘authentic happiness’, but where is it? Not surprisingly, when the authenticity of things and people around us has been changing exponentially, from “having a body versus being a body”, to cloning, and more, it is becoming imperative to seek the mainstay of human cognition. This is where the wisdom of Gandhi could be of immense use, offering us the impeccable means of nonviolence for forming the core of coexistence. With human greed, coupled with the ever-increasing plethora of wants and the multitude of emotions disturbing the very foundation of our cognition (acquired through our cultural heritage, rightly, or even, partly so), the equipoise of human existence has never been as flimsy as it is today and the end result of our irresponsible behavior is being highlighted, like never before, during the pandemic caused by the Covid 19 virus.

While psychology, as a science, grew in the West under the leadership of William James in the USA and Wundt in Germany in the late 19th and early part of the twentieth century, Gandhi, around the same time or soon afterwards, was exploring the roots of the science of behavior in the gigantic canvas encompassing three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe), where he lived, interacted and experimented to explore the nature of human cognition through, what is commonly known as, his experiments with truth. Gandhi, in his own way, was exploring the nature of cognition, whereas the science of psychology was struggling to keep cognition as its focus of study, thanks to the anti-cognition movement led by distinguished psychologist Skinner during the mid- twentieth century.

Further, while almost all leading scholars, ranging from Skinner and Bandura to Maslow and Howard Gardner, have cited Gandhi in their works, very few, to the best of our knowledge, have afforded an in-depth coverage or tacit applications based on his life and work. In fact, when Erikson wrote in 1969, in the above mentioned book, *Gandhi's Truth* that, "...I sensed an affinity between Gandhi's truth and the insights of modern psychology" (p. 440), the science of psychology was far from ready to accept human cognition as the mainstay of its subject matter. Unquestionably, Gandhi was far ahead of his time, similar to Ebbinghaus, whose self-experiments on memory could gain attention and appreciation only several decades later.

It is contended here that for its growth, modern psychology needs Gandhi, and as regards the psychology of wisdom, there is plenty of wisdom to look for in Gandhi. Gandhi is, undoubtedly, the founding father of modern psychology in the East in as much as, if not more than, William James or Wundt in the West, unless someone ignorantly claims that exploring into the science of behavior can be confined only to the walls of a laboratory. The spotlight on Gandhi would also go a long way in overcoming the objection raised by Arnett (2008) that the dominant American psychology tends to focus only on 5% of the world's population, obscuring the behavior of the remaining 95% of the population of the world.

The need to concentrate on wisdom has grown exponentially with the unprecedented growth of technology during the previous century, enabling us to dwell on the role of human intelligence in establishing a technological evolution vis-a-vis the ongoing, biological evolution. Despite the above, the study of wisdom has not found its place in the menu of the science of psychology. We have been amazed at the potential impact of cloning, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and more ranging from that on our personal lives to the survival of human beings and to all things sentient in the universe. So, while earlier it was simply the biological evolution which human beings were forced to grapple with in the context of the survival of the fittest, today, we have, in addition, the extraordinary growth of the technological evolution that needs to be managed so as to safeguard our existence.

In overseeing the problems caused by both biological and technological evolutions, human cognition needs to be rebooted as well and made free from the viruses of violence, greed, and the abuse of natural resources. This will enable us to scrutinize all the issues taken together, and understand how morality and moral responsibility, the anchors of the yester-years, are being pushed into isolated islands around the globe, making us wonder whether humans have been misnomered as *homo sapiens* (Latin for 'wise man') and should instead be called '*homo prospectus*' (Seligman et al., 2016), seeing that the hallmark of human beings lies in their ability to prospect about the future. But, problems and issues do not end with this new nomenclature.

While philosophers appear reluctant to accept the recent psychological analysis of people acting rationally without deliberation or even irrationally with deliberation, their explanations fail to solve the debate between internalists who argue that the ideas central to us provide justification to our beliefs in contrast to externalists who seek justification outwardly, say in factors such as the environment. Further, we find no definite answers to unprincipled virtue in the moral agency of our time. Seligman and his colleagues (*ibid.*) are trying to trace roots of wisdom in the deep self of human beings, but where is Gandhi, comprehensively investigated and presented, our moral man of the previous century who presented the dynamics of the deep self through his experiments with truth.

This book is about the iteration of nonviolence as the default mode, a precursor of our existence as presented by Gandhi. In so doing, we explore the operating system of human cognition loaded with wisdom, something that we say is available everywhere but are being able to find, only, in bits and pieces. Wisdom emanating from the adherence to nonviolence is needed holistically and consistently. It must be ever ready, to scroll up and down and manage problems caused by any evolution—biological, technological or the two, in interaction with each other.

While configuring this volume, we realized the need to look for Gandhi's wisdom beyond our own limited knowledge and from what we had learned from interviewing members of Gandhi family, his coworkers and scholars of Gandhian studies from multiple disciplines. With the

cooperation of and excellent support from several eminent scholars from various parts of the world, we were able to carve this book on Gandhi's wisdom with the following three prime considerations.

Firstly, we have focused on the nature and measurement of psychology of wisdom, limitations in conceptualizing it narrowly and particularly in the absence of support from interdisciplinary studies such as sociology, history, political science, and economics, and more importantly, lessons from Gandhi. The case, in point, is our chapter on "Milgram's lost Gandhi: Whither Gandhi's wisdom of nonviolence in the psychology of wisdom."

The second part of the book deals with our understanding of wisdom in the context of such nuanced forms of behavior as fasting, silence, vows and more that have only recently gained attention in modern psychology, but for Gandhi, were integral parts of his behavioral repertoire, helping him to expand and reboot his psychological capital known as wisdom. Not only did he internalize the interrelationship between his cognition, motivation and emotion, but he also aligned them in the context of social good, illustrating them in such forms as non-possession (aparigraha), mitigation of us-them boundaries, anasakti (use of pure means) and the embracing technology wisely. The chapters in this section represent the contributions from a core of scholars who range from psychologists to administrators and interdisciplinary faculty, deeply interested in the life and works of Gandhi.

Finally, in the third part of this book, we have sought contributions from those scholars in the West who have found in Gandhi, an exemplar for their lives and have written extensively on him and are known for their books and for managing Gandhi related publications. For Gandhi, belief has no meaning without any action. It is heartening to note that one of the contributors, Michael Nagler has established a center of nonviolence based on Gandhian principles and is managing a harmony project. While we could have invited many others, the limitations of space constrained us from doing so.

The final chapter of this book on the relevance of Gandhi's wisdom in the twenty first century begins with the fallacy that we consider ourselves wise but create us-them dichotomies, and, in the process, are failing to benefit from the wisdom of other living beings. Further, we have

argued that the psychology of wisdom needs input from other social and related sciences to expand its applications. And finally, we have raised the issue of what is good about a science if it does not illustrate its authenticity, asking the reader, subsequently, whether the volume enabled them to experience the traces of authentic wisdom in the life and works of Mahatma (the great soul) Gandhi.

We would like to thank members of the Gandhi family and his coworkers who helped us in securing relevant information on his life and work. Also, it has been a great pleasure to work with each contributor in this book, bringing in and highlighting unique aspects of Gandhi's wisdom which remained, hitherto, neglected or poorly explored. In fact, we cannot thank them enough. Further, we take this opportunity to thank everyone who read and offered comments on the chapters of our book.

As always, it has been a great experience to work with our publisher, Palgrave Macmillan, and, as we move along with the production of our fourth book with this company, we thank the current editorial team consisting of Beth, Brian, Isobel, Liam, Lynnie, Shukkanthy and others.

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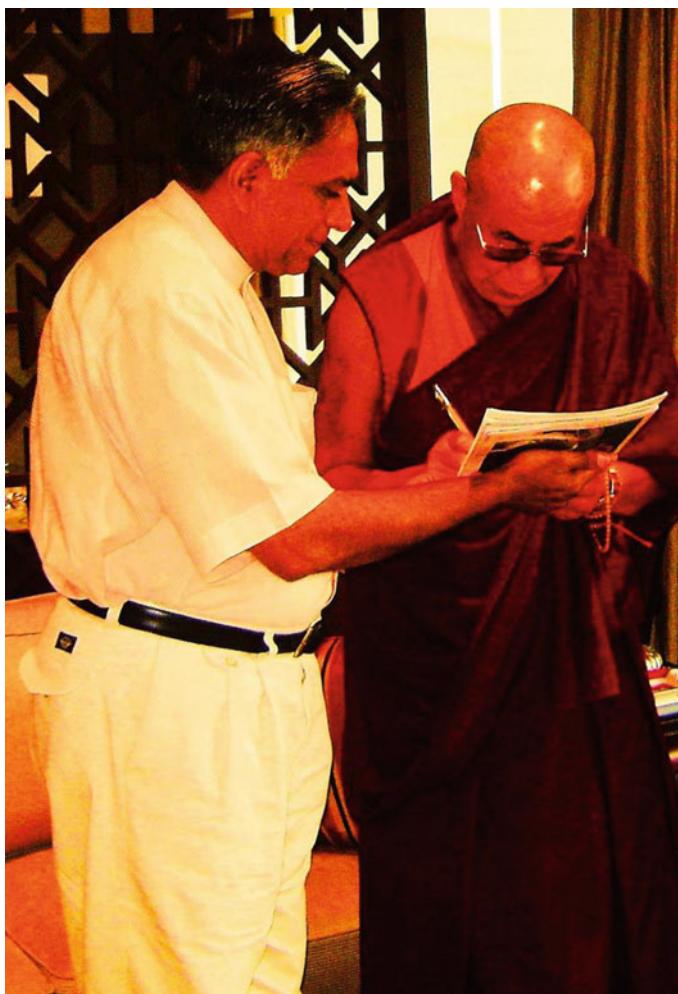
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# Acknowledgements

In preparing this book, we acknowledge the encouragement received from the members of the Gandhi family, his coworkers, our colleagues and the members of our family. We would like to make a special mention of the encouragement and blessings we received from His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, (whose name translates to “A teacher who is an Ocean of Wisdom”) in 2008 to work in the field of nonviolence and well-being. At an event in Mumbai, India, he signed the book, *Psychology of nonviolence and aggression*, authored by Professor V. K. Kool and published by Macmillan-Palgrave, 2008 (photograph below).



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# Part I

## **Gandhi and the Psychology of Wisdom**



# 1

## Gandhi's Truth as a Precursor of Authentic Wisdom

V. K. Kool and Rita Agrawal

If uplifting our capabilities to come to terms with people and things around us reflects wisdom, any number of experiments human beings conduct upon themselves or outside of them to search for the truth, constitutes our inveterate attempt to configure our ongoing wisdom. In his writings as well as in his works, Gandhi experimented to seek the truth with his core belief in coexistence and nonviolence.

It is no wonder that in his recent memoir, former President of USA, Barack Obama (2020), wrote that if he was asked as to whom he would like to take out for dinner, he would say "Gandhi". This seems quite surprising, knowing the frugal vegetarian meals that Gandhi had and that, too, by sitting on the floor rather than at a dining table. Well, if we think of Einstein's remark regarding Gandhi, that he was the

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wisest person to have stepped on earth, Obama's choice is not surprising, despite his having spent years at the White House and having enjoyed the luxuries of life. Yet, in all probability, the majority of us would have loved to have a meeting with Gandhi but maybe, not to have dinner with!

Further, we wonder what Obama would learn from Gandhi's wisdom. In his memoir, Obama has stated that Gandhi's greatness aside, he had failed to remove the curse of the caste system and solve some of the other problems in India. In other words, there is a misconception that if someone is wise, s/he should be able to offer a magic pill to solve all the problems in a community. However, in the same memoir, Obama wrote that Gandhi, who had faced two World Wars, had set the moral tone of the previous century—a great compliment, indeed! Moral engagements offer the highest form of wisdom and help us look beyond political parties, religious or community affiliations.

We may bask in the glory of having had the company of great people such as Gandhi, but to embrace the genuineness of his wisdom is totally different. In contrast to the above views of Obama, consider those of Howard Gardner, an eminent scholar of human intelligence and faculty at Harvard University, from where Obama had studied and graduated. In an interview published in the *Harvard Gazette* (2018), Gardner has stated that he enjoys reading Gandhi's autobiography frequently and wishes to be like Gandhi in any proportion.

The above provide ample evidence for the different nuances through which Gandhi, a small, half-clad person, has been viewed: Einstein's wise human being who enlightened his mind, Obama's dinner companion, and a favorite of a leading scholar of human intelligence, Gardner, who broadens his own cognition by reading Gandhi's autobiography. When intellectuals such as Einstein, leaders such as Obama, and scholars such as Gardner regard Gandhi as an exemplar, it becomes imperative that psychologists become curious in learning about his messages to humanity, for both individuals and the society at large.

Despite the above, it is unfortunate that while experts who specialize in the psychology of wisdom have mentioned Gandhi in their research, none, to the best of our knowledge, has attempted to provide an in-depth analysis of Gandhi's wisdom obtained through his experiments