

Message from Our Experiences from the Chipko Movement and the Anti Tehri Dam Movement

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I

In this age of globalization the main object should be to help people in achieving a lifestyle in which they enjoy permanent peace, permanent happiness, and contentment. Today, there is temporary peace, temporary happiness, and prosperity. And that prosperity comes out of the exploitation of nature. It is only human beings that are destroying nature in the name of development. Other beings are not destroying nature. They are living in perfect harmony with nature. Today we have become the rich children of the poor mother. The mother has become too poor. She is sustaining us all, as it is the duty of a mother.

We had seen a picture of a dying mother who was still feeding her child taken on the occasion of the Bengal famine of 1943. The mother was on the verge of death, but the child was sucking her breast. That means till the last moment she was feeding the child. The condition of our mother is the same today. Mother earth is feeding us even as she is dying. We have forgotten the mother and we have become prosperous while the mother is dying. Nature itself is just doing the duty of a mother. Then, what do we have to do?

The environment is only one of the three major problems of the world today. The first problem is the threat of war. In spite of two great wars which brought so much devastation in the previous century, today even in small nations people are amassing weapons. Why? They will say, for their defense. Defense against whom? Against poor neighbors who are as poor as they are. Who gains? Those who trade in arms do. The governments will not say how much they are spending on defense. They keep it secret. Secret from the people, from whom they collect money in the form of taxes. Further, the wealth of the poor country is going to arms sellers. The first problem of humankind is thus the threat of war.

The second problem is pollution. Never in human history have we seen so much pollution. We have polluted our skies, our rivers, and our oceans. So where to live? We have become so accustomed to pollution that now we would not feel we are dying a slow death. And our strength is decreasing. The second problem is thus pollution. The third problem is poverty. Therefore, the greatest mission of these times is to eliminate the three evils, the threat of war, pollution, and poverty.

The challenge before you is to change the society which we are leaving behind for you. This society stands on four pillars. The first pillar is authority. The second pillar

is wealth. The third pillar is arms, the fourth higher learning. These are the four pillars on which this society stands. And everybody is in a race to acquire these things. If I gain authority, then I will rule over others. If I have more money, then I will be more prosperous. If I have more arms, then I can threaten others. And then, there is high learning, which is only for a few people who can understand big things not for the common people.

If authority is replaced by service, and if there is competition in doing service, this will benefit more people. Wealth should be replaced by restraint: using fewer and fewer things. From where does this wealth come, after all? Wealth comes from the earth. We are exploiting the mother earth. Arms should be replaced by peace. And now, we have great philosophies and large volumes in the libraries, but in our day to day behavior we are far below this knowledge. Replace high learning with good behavior. Try, then, to build new pillars of society: pillars of service, restraint, peace, and good behavior. This will make you happy. You will enjoy permanent peace. And you will have contentment. This is the ultimate objective of human life: to enjoy peace, happiness, and contentment. Today you have pleasures, but for a limited time and you are never satisfied. You have to build a world in which everyone lives in happiness and leads a peaceful life, a contented life.

The important thing is austerity: use fewer and fewer things. Today, unfortunately, people regard having more and more things as a symbol of civilization. But this comes by robbing the shares of others and of the coming generation. Austerity, then, is the first thing. All great men led lives of austerity. How many suits of clothes did Jesus Christ, Buddha, or Gandhi possess? I had the chance to meet Mahatma Gandhi one day before he passed away. He was a very simple man; he had only one piece of cloth because all the great men have always tried to live in close affinity with nature. The closer you are to nature, the more you are happy, the more you are carefree.

Today we are running away from nature, and in this way, we are destroying nature. Had it been a class in olden times, we would have sat under a tree and enjoyed the open sky. So, go to nature. Nature will solve all your problems and it will give you permanent happiness. In a closed room, all your senses are closed. But when you are in close communion with nature, you are happy, healthy, and contented.

All the great men preferred to live with fewer things and most of them walked. Buddha walked and Vinoba Bhave, a disciple of Gandhi, walked asking for the donation of land for poor people. These are the secrets of being happy, living in close proximity to nature. Getting up early in the morning, you can walk two or three kilometers and you will feel happy and fresh. The freshness that we get from air conditioning or television is only temporary. Real happiness comes from nature itself. Nature is the source of all strength and happiness. The birds do not have refrigerators or hospitals and live in close proximity to nature, and they are very happy. Thus, closeness to nature is the first thing that I want to convey to you.

II

I was very fortunate to see Gandhi one day before he passed away. It was on January 29, 1948, that we met him. In our area in the Himalayan hill state, the freedom movement continued after the independence of India in 1947 because the rule of the

king continued. We launched a very big movement, thousands of people came, and they got themselves freed. It was on account of the great freedom fighter Sri Dev Suman, who died in jail after a fast of eighty-four days for independence. The inspiration was there; and the people came forward. Thus, we achieved our *swaraj* and ended the rule of the ruler, and only two of our workers were killed. But, we did not allow any government officer to be ill-treated. In order to save them from the people who were very angry with them, we kept them inside the jail so that they could be guarded. We sent all their bedding and their food to the jail in order to guard them because the people were very angry with them. Therefore, we went to Gandhi to report. He patted me and said, "Oh you have brought my non-violence down to the earth. And you have done a task as great as the Himalayas are." It was on January 29, 1948. The next day he was shot dead.

Most people say that Gandhi brought independence to India. But his dream was quite different. He was the first freedom fighter in the world that did not run the government after the freedom of his country. He never ran the government because his dream was to achieve the *swaraj*, the freedom, for the villages. Further, he believed in a decentralized system of government in which people would decide their destiny themselves. Not a centralized government, not a parliament. Rather, each village should be a republic in which people decide their destiny themselves. Thus, he said in his last appeal, "Now the Indian National Congress' work is over. All first class leaders should go to villages and prepare people for running their own affairs." He was never in favor of the central government but wanted the people's own government in each village.

Today, in the centralized system you have to maintain an expensive bureaucracy, and this administration itself is an unproductive activity. This is a simple rule of economics that in a system in which there are more unproductive activities the burden piles on the common people. There should be no administrative machinery which is so costly. At the most, one or two matters like defense and foreign affairs may be dealt with by the central government. But other matters should be managed by the people themselves.

Gandhi was a visionary. He had a vision of India having more than one-half million village republics, each self-sufficient in its basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Gandhi launched the constructive work program of which *khadi*, hand-spun and hand-woven cloth, was in the center and several village industries were nearby. Its objective was not only to provide employment for all, but also to free the common people from exploitation due to centralized production, transport, and the migration of the youth from the clean environments of villages to city slums. This was the dream of Gandhi, but he did not live to realize this dream.

III

Gandhi's message to the remote Himalayan region was sent by two of his English disciples, Mira Behn and Sarala Behn. Mira Behn was the daughter of Admiral Slade and she was interested in cattle-breeding. She established her center Pashulok in the foothills near Rishikesh. But soon she moved to the middle Himalayas in Tehri Garhwal about 100 kilometers in Bhilangana, a tributary of Bhagirathi (Ganga), into the

small village of Geonli. She established her Gopal Ashram in that village and tried to implement a Gandhian plan for self-sufficient hill villages, which was yet to be achieved. She influenced local public workers and the villagers.

Sarala Behn (Miss Catherine Heilman) had come to work with Dr. Mohan Singh Mehta as a teacher from England. Udaipur did not suit her very much, so she came to Sevagram near Wardha in central India and joined Nai Talim Sangh, Gandhi's basic educational experiment. The hot climate of Wardha did not suit her and she came to Chunada, a Gandhian ashram in Kumaon Himalayas. There she moved among villagers and prepared them for the independence movement. In 1942, the British rulers regarded her as a most dangerous person and arrested her during the Quit India Movement. She had seen the strength of hill women and found potential in them to work for independence. After her release from British prison, she settled down in Kausani, in the Kumaon hills, and opened Lakshmi Ashram, a Nai-Talim (new education) center on Gandhian lines for hill girls.

Vimla, my wife, is the daughter of a forest officer. She wanted to study further. As there was no arrangement for the education for girls, her father sent her to Sarala Behn's ashram. Both of her brothers had taken part in the independence movement. Thus, she had an urge to do something for society.

I was a political worker. When I contacted Mira Behn, she wanted me to work in a pilot project which she had received sanction from Jawaharlal Nehru for the Himalayan villages. But the government sent officers to run it and Mira Behn withdrew, left the area, and went to Kashmir. In this way we are the product of the Gandhian movements, of Gandhian activists.

Our elders, my brother, and Vimla's father arranged our marriage, but Vimla set the condition that she would marry only if I give up party politics. I resigned from the political party and settled in the remote village of Silyara, where we established an ashram in June 1956 for the service for the villagers, especially the neglected women. We were married in a simple ceremony attended by hundreds of people from our own villages.

Vimla started a school for village girls, where they could come at night, because in the day time they were not given an opportunity to go to school. This is because there was no tradition of educating girls in our area. From the time they were very small, girls had to look after their younger brothers, and when a little older they were to go to forest first to tend the cows and later to collect fuel and fodder as well. They were to be married quite early. Our ashram became a place for singing and dancing for these girls. They felt some freedom in the ashram.

The villagers would give us food grains during the harvesting season, as they would give to others who did the service of the community, such as the blacksmith, the drummer and the rest. Similarly, the villagers would also give us food grains. In this way, we started our work. And this was the beginning of identifying ourselves with the people whom we served. One special thing which Gandhi wanted was, as he said in his prayers, "Oh, god, give me strength to be one with the common masses of India." He never asked that "Give me strength to rule over the people," he prayed for strength to be one with common masses of India. And this was our beginning, to be one with the common masses of India. I started a laborer's co-operative and we

worked with the laborers; Vimla taught the children. In this way we won the confidence of the people.

Later, in 1960, when there was Chinese aggression on the northern front, Acharya Vinoba Bhave, the walking saint of India, who collected land in donation for the landless, asked me to take the message of Gandhi to border villages. I started walking. I found people were brave enough to face the Chinese aggression, but they were being weakened by liquor. The government, in order to earn revenue, was opening country liquor shops, which resulted in the increase of bus accidents and the disintegration of society by quarrels. I reported this to Vinoba and requested his blessings for a movement by women against liquor. This was the revival of Gandhi's strategy of picketing liquor shops during the Indian freedom movement. A shop was proposed near our Ashram. Vinoba said in his message, "How can India equipped with liquor combat China, freed from opium." A retired judge came forward and insisted to be the first to picket the proposed shop. The government had to abandon the idea of the shop. Thereafter, the movement spread in other areas and succeeded in closing liquor shops in five hill districts adjacent to China. The movement lasted for six years from 1965 to 1971.

The government felled trees in the hills to earn revenue. This created land slides and the drying up of water sources. We had the impression that this was on account of excessive tree felling by the contractors as this activity was given the name of the scientific felling of trees. Due to people's opposition, the contractor system was abolished and replaced by forest development co-operation and felling by the forest laborers' co-operatives. We started to work with the co-operatives, but soon realized that it would make no difference whether a tree was felled by the contractor's axe or by the co-operative's axe. In order to stop tree felling, we started another movement, the Chipko movement, to hug trees, and we saved these from being cut down. The women were in the forefront in this movement. They challenged the slogan of so-called scientific forestry.

What do the forests bear?
Resin, timber and foreign exchange,

by raising the truly scientific slogan;

What do the forests bear?
Soil, water, and pure air. Soil, water and pure air are the basis of life.

The movement thus was to save the lives of the people. And because life is more precious, and is dear to everyone, so they came.

Wherever the forest trees were marked for felling, women went to protect them. They camped in huts in the forests. Laborers were brought from Nepal, but women prevented their work by hugging the trees, when they sought a chance to cut the trees at night. The authorities kept women in jails. Vimla went with her six-year old child to jail in the movement. Many women went to jail. But they did not yield. One thing I should say from our own experience is that when women are in firm determination,

when they decide, they will do it. They will not leave in the middle. They will do it. Once women decided that we have to stop tree-felling, they did not yield. In spite of all the hardships and atrocities they continued the movement.

The movement went on from 1973 to 1981, when finally a moratorium was put on felling of green trees for commercial purposes above 1,000 meters altitude in Uttarakhand. The moratorium was extended to the neighboring hill state of Himachal Pradesh. Himachal Pradesh lifted the ban in April, 2006. The Supreme Court took cognizance of this on the basis of my statement in the press and again placed a moratorium on the felling of trees.

The next step of the Chipko movement was to prepare people for greening the hill slopes with trees giving food, fodder, fiber, fertilizer, and a few trees when mature for fuel and timber. The renowned world famous forester Richard St. Barbe Baker supported our stand and emphatically remarked that no tree on hill slopes should be cut. Trees there maintain the stability of the slopes.

We could not continue our campaign as in the meantime the Tehri high dam, one of the highest dams, 263 meters high, over Ganga, was to be constructed with the aid of the Soviet Union. We launched a non-violent movement against it. Twice I went on long fasts; one was for forty-nine days and the other was for seventy-four days. When it became difficult for the dam builders to continue construction due to mass protests, an accident involving a bus carrying demonstrators was conspired. Sixteen persons died and many were injured in the accident. Thereafter, I told people to stop because the dam builders were butchers. Vimla and I, however, have been still sitting by the dam site for the last seventeen years. The life of the dam has been reduced. According to Dr. K. S. Valdiya, an expert of Himalayan geology, it will last only thirty years. The flow of water in the river is reduced by 50 percent and as there is no possibility of an increase, the river flow will decrease further.

The conclusion from these struggles is that the establishment everywhere is for short-term economic benefits and converting nature into cash. Nature once destroyed can not be regenerated in its original form. Already a number of species have become extinct. The challenge before our generation is to revive the pristine glory of nature for the coming generations and make this earth a living place for all species. So far as diversity is concerned, we are poorer than the primitive man. This is due to the exploitative character of our civilization. The crisis which the civilization has created can be solved only by the message of culture. Culture prospered in the forests. In India we have inherited an *Aranya* (forest) culture. The *Rishis* (sages and saints) opened their ashrams in the forests, where they imparted education to the young people all alike, for the rich and the poor, the ruler and the subjects. That was education for life.

Since it is the question of our survival, the revival of our dying planet is a challenge to the young people to come forward. They should wake up from the slumber and regret the existing society, which stands on the four pillars of authority, wealth, arms and high learning. It should be replaced by a society standing on the four pillars: service instead of authority, sacrifice or restraint instead of wealth, peace instead of weapons, and good behavior instead of high learning. All will have an equal opportunity to express and the goal will be *Sarvodaya*, the development of all beings. That was the dream of Gandhi, a practical visionary of our times. He combined in him the truth of

Socrates, the sacrifice of Jesus, and the non-violence of Buddha in the context of the twentieth century.

Further, those who suffer should come forward. This was what Gandhi taught. This was the difference between the Indian independence movement and the other movements in the world. Gandhi organized the sufferers. Those who are suffering, he made them brave. Though he took a long time, the people became brave soldiers and they resisted. This is the special thing about non-violence. India was the birth-place of Buddha, who centuries ago gave the lesson of non-violence. And there were many who followed him. But Gandhi was the last in the previous century that renewed this cult of non-violence and placed before humankind the new idea of non-violence. As we have seen, Japan is already a victim of World War Two. But Gandhi said that wars can only win the bodies of the people, not the soul.

This is the special thing about our culture: we believe in the soul. There are two different things. One is the body. Another is the soul inside. The soul never dies. You can kill the body but not the soul. This is the one special thing about the culture of the East and about the cultures of Japan and India, we believe in the power of the soul. And if there is a confrontation between armies, a small army can be defeated by a strong army. But even there is one single person with a strong soul and firm determination, all the armies of the world cannot defeat him. We have seen it from all those people who believe so. Jesus is living today, Socrates is living today, and Gandhi is living today because they have left the lesson for humankind that souls are greater. We should believe in the power of our soul. That is the only lesson which they have left behind. They are no more in body with us, but their message is with us, which is still enlightening us.

And what is prayer? Prayer means we are asking for inner strength from Almighty. It is not the outer strength, but inner strength. Everyday in the morning and in the evening we are asking for inner strength. And that strength makes us stronger not only in worldly matters, but in all spiritual matters, too.

So friends, this is the message. In the Chipko movement, what did we do? We said, "You cut us, we are ready. But we will not allow you to fell the trees." The song was, "Let the axes work. We will save our trees." This firm determination was repeated. And this determination came from the heart. So what I have to say, to conclude, in my talk about the Chipko movement is that we have to believe in the powers of our soul, in our inner strength. We have to increase our inner strength. And this inner strength makes us. This enlightens us. This was the work, which all the great teachers of Humankind had done. Buddha had done this work. Jesus had done this work. In our times, Gandhi did that work. Strengthen the power of your soul, your inner self. And once we are enlightened, our body may perish but our soul never dies. The message will be taken up by others. That is the one thing which we have learned from our experiences.

IV

These movements spread through folk songs. In a people's movement the appeal is not to the head but to the heart, because people have a heart. The message should reach the hearts of people. In order to prepare them for action, you have to reach

their hearts, from hearts to hands. The beginning of our movement thus was from folk songs which awaken the people. There were no speeches. There were no books. There were no newspapers. But there were folk songs. And people immediately came forward and joined the movements. In other movements, the appeal may be to the intellect. But in a people's movement, the appeal is to heart. Whatever is in your head, take it to your heart and then act with your hands.

This applies to all movements all over the world. The movements in which action comes from the heart have an everlasting effect. These movements cannot be crushed by the authorities because authority reaches only to the body. They will arrest us and put us in jail. But authority cannot reach the hearts of the people. Once an idea had been implanted in the hearts of the people, it becomes their own thing. The other special thing about folk songs is that once people start singing with you, it becomes their own thing. It is not the thing as in a speech. Whatever the speaker say, it is an expression. But the folk song immediately becomes the thing of the people, they start singing. I do not think that when we make a good speech that people will repeat it. But they repeated folk songs. And they go on repeating it. The songs of the Chipko movement echoed in the hills and dales in the forest, everywhere. Children, uneducated people, or women working in the forests and hills while cutting the grass and collecting the firewood, were singing these songs. This is the one special thing about the Chipko movement. Folk songs became very popular.

Do not forget that you have been bestowed with three gifts. The first is head, the second is heart, and the third is hands. But most people when they are young do not realize the importance of these three gifts. They think that the head is for cramming books and throwing it out in the examinations, and getting a good grade. The real work of the head is creative thinking. The head is for thinking, and whatever amenities we enjoy today are on account of creative thinking. Some people who thought about the problem and came up with a solution left a gift for us for the coming generation.

The heart is for compassion. Not to be a miser, only for one person. All great men who showed the path to humankind, such as Jesus Christ, Buddha, and Gandhi, had a large heart full of compassion, compassion not only for human beings but for all beings, for birds, animals, trees, mountains and rivers. The rule of love is whomsoever you love, you will receive love back. This is the secret of being loved by all. Love all beings and you will be loved by all. Then your view of seeing towards life will be different. Today, the materialistic civilization has made us misers, we think only about our own profit and not for others. But this whole world is our home; and all beings on this earth are our sisters and brothers. This should be our view towards other beings.

These hands are for construction, not for destruction. This is the secret to be happy, healthy, and contentment during our life; the right use of your head, heart, and hands and do not wait for tomorrow. Whatever good things you want to do start them from today because tomorrow you will be with yesterdays one thousand years. Tomorrow never comes. Whatever you want to do, start from now and you will find that you are progressing in your life. This is real progress.

Progress does not lie in cramming old ideas and old things. Progress lies in having new ideas and new ideas come from nature and from your association with new peo-

ple. Get in touch with new people and get from them new experiences, and whenever you have your holidays, go in groups to far off areas and enjoy this, the company of nature, and you will realize that you have come with new strength, new ideas. That is the meaning of holiday. Holiday does not mean enjoying at home and play. Come in contact with new persons, new areas, and refill yourself from nature. As your petrol is exhausted, you go to a filling station to fill your vehicle. The refilling of human energy is from nature. Because nature is our real home, when we go farther and farther from our home we become helpless. This is the tragedy of modern life. We have made an artificial world for ourselves and we say that we are progressing. Go nearer to nature and this cannot be explained in words this has to be experienced by our own selves.

I am saying this because I myself gained this experience as I travelled without any money in my pocket. I have walked from Kashmir to Kohima, from the western side of the Himalayas to the eastern side, a distance of 4,870 kilometers and spread the message of the Chipko movement.

The first thing is how to fill your belly. We devised a method. In the evening when you go to a new place, it is children and dogs who take notice of you. Dogs bark at you and the children follow you. They want to know what he is and how he came. I would send away the dog and play with the children. And it was evening time, so everybody was saying, "What happened with the children today, where did they go?" So they asked the neighbors. No children had come home. They would call them. I said, "Go back to your home," and then they would ask me, "Where will you go?" I said, "I will stay here." "What will you eat?" I told them, "You bring one chapatti (a type of Indian bread) for me from your house." They went back to their homes and they would ask their mother to give one chapati. The parents would ask who is the person who is asking for one chapati? Because previously when any visitor came to the village they went to the headman's house or to some respectable person's house. They said one person has come and has asked for a chapati, and I had so many chapatis! Some I would give to the dogs, some I kept for the next day as it is difficult to get food in the day time as everyone has gone to work. Once it happened that I could not find children as I was late when I reached the village. And the villagers were so much afraid that they closed their doors. I was outside. Then one old man opened the window to see who is this person. He told others that he cannot be a robber. Robbers come empty and they go away with whatever they loot. Here is a man with a rucksack, so he cannot be a robber. In this way I completed this long march of three hundred days without any money. I gained much experience.

In this way, friends, the real education, the education of life is to get new experiences. In this, enrich yourselves with new experiences. Whatever is written in the books may be good for background, but you have to experience for your own self. Those people who have written books had experience of old times; you have to live in the coming years. Old experiences cannot help much in the coming years, so you should have your own experiences. Enrich yourself; equip yourself with new experiences that will fill you with self-confidence. It is not a degree that is valuable; it is self-confidence, when you can rehearse, when you can say, "I can cope with the situation, I can do it." Self-confidence is the greatest thing that you have to acquire. More self-

confidence, more success; the first thing thus is self-confidence.

V

Today, the world has become very small. But there is darkness everywhere. This darkness is to be done away with. I say this especially to you as Japan is known as the country of the rising sun. When the sun rises, all darkness disappears. Do not think that these electric bulbs and other lights prevent the darkness. It is the darkness of selfishness, the darkness of national boundaries, and this darkness is to be removed. The real progress will be when we will be the citizens of one earth. And again, since human beings have been given these three things, the head to think, the heart to feel, and hands to construct, it is the duty of the human being to elevate the miseries of all. We boast of a civilization that is very much civilized, but imagine how many species of plants and living beings have disappeared from this planet. Every minute, species are disappearing as a result of human greed.

The objective of our life should be to revive the glory of the mother earth. And nature will give you strength and you will leave the world better than you have found it. We must repair and heal the mother earth. This is the greatest challenge before us, to heal the wounds of the mother earth, to make this place suitable for the living of all the species. We should think how we can revive the glory of the mother earth, how we can bring back to life the children of the mother earth that became extinct. This is the greatest job before you. And it can be fulfilled if we practice certain things in our life.

I have come to Japan with a hope. I have come with a hope that Japan is the country of the rising sun. Do you know what the rising sun means? When the sun rises all the darkness is gone. And the darkness in the world is, as I have mentioned, three things: war, pollution, and poverty. We have to just do away with the darkness.

I am a practical worker and activist, though very old now. As I have already mentioned, I undertook long foot marches. The best way to spread a message is walking. You can use bicycles. I appeal to the young people to think over my proposal of a march from Tokyo to Toronto. See on the map where Tokyo is and where Toronto is. Tokyo is in the east and Toronto is in the west. That means most of the area of the world will be covered with this message. In this Tokyo-Toronto Foot March, the message is only one word. Peace. Buddha could walk with the message. Jesus could convey the message in the circumstances in which he was killed and when he was crucified. Why not we? You will be welcomed everywhere.

People with new ideas are always in a minority. But later, good things prevail. Tokyo to Toronto, T and T. When you start some new things, it should touch the imagination of people. It should sound good. This is important, both T's.

The real thing which we have to achieve is peace. As in our prayers, we say, "*Shanti, shanti, shanti*" three times, peace. This means peace inside myself, peace around me, and peace all over the world. Therefore, in the Tokyo-Toronto Foot March, the participants should chant only this: Peace, peace, peace.

The young people of the country of the rising sun should go with a message of new hope to the whole of humankind. They are waiting for you. You have simply to walk on, to walk on.