The anecdote below is reproduced from a book of anecdotes, *Stray Glimpses of Bapu* authored by the close associate of Mahatma Gandhi late Acharya Kaka Saheb Kalelkar. This anecdote shows Gandhiji’s attitude towards nature’s gifts to mankind.

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Apologies to the Tree

Acharya Kaka Saheb Kalelkar

“…even these four leaves should be plucked by us humbly, with due apologies to the tree”

Author

In 1930 I was transferred to the Yeravda Jail to be with Bapu. I had taken a large quantity of slivers with me to last me through the five months of imprisonment which I had still to undergo. But the Government soon brought Shri Vallabh Bhai also to Yeravda. There was only a wall between him and us, but we could not meet him. Bapu felt this deeply. He often said, “Look how this Government is annoying us!"
They have brought Vallabh Bhai all the way from Sabarmati, and kept him so near that we can even hear his voice sometimes. And yet we cannot meet him. What fun does the Government get out of this, I wonder?” Those who saw Bapu from a distance could perceive in this only his noble patience. But those who had the privilege of knowing him intimately knew the intensity of his love and the depth of his pain when that love was wounded. As Bapu walked in the prison courtyard, his thoughts strayed continuously to him who sat behind that dividing wall.

One day Major Martin, the Jail Superintendent, brought a note from Vallabh-Bhai: “I have run out of slivers. Please send me some if you can.” Vallabh-Bhai was a champion spinner. Whenever he had a spare moment, he spent it either in pacing his room to and fro like a lion in a cage or in spinning. His mother, too, had a passion for spinning. Even her blindness could not keep her away from her beloved spinning wheel. The people of her household had to hide their own slivers in order to keep them from her avid hands. If she found any slivers anywhere she just sat and spun them away! And Vallabh-Bhai was a true son of his mother!

Bapu asked me, “Kaka have you any slivers?” “As many as you want,” I returned promptly, “but I have no knowledge of carding. If I give these away, what shall I do myself?” Said Bapu, “Do not worry. I will teach you carding. Or I will make slivers for you.” “I should prefer to learn carding,” said I, although I had my fears. I handed over all my slivers to be sent to Vallabh-Bhai.

Then Bapu turned the adjoining room into a carding school with all the necessary paraphernalia, and taught me carding in a few days.

But then the rainy season came upon us. The string of my carding-bow grew slack with the moisture in the air. What was to be done? We pondered and thought we should try putting the cotton and the carding-bow in the sun whenever it was fine. But that did not work, because it rained very hard and the sun did not shine at all. So we pondered some more, and remembered that there was an oven in our courtyard which was used by the Anglo-Indian convicts for baking bread. I began to leave my cotton and carding bow -string there in the evenings. They responded to this treatment and became satisfyingly taut, but how were the ruffled fibres of the string to be smoothed? We hit upon the method of rubbing them down with the leaves of the bitter neem.

One day Bapu noticed that I was in the habit of breaking off a whole twig for the sake of four or five leaves. Whereupon he said, “This is himsa (violence). Others might not be able to understand, but you can. Even
these four leaves should be plucked by us humbly, with due apologies to the tree. You break off whole twigs.”

From the next day I left off doing so. Being tall, I had no difficulty in plucking just the four or five leaves I needed. Then I had another brainwave. I started waxing my string with a bit of candle to protect it from the atmospheric moisture, on days when the oven was not working. This did the trick, and Bapu was pleased.

And then we stopped getting datun (fresh neem or babul sticks, which are chewed and used as toothbrushes) from outside. I said, “Bapu ji, this place abounds in neem trees. I will make a nice, fresh datun for you every morning.” Bapu agreed. The next day I brought a datun, pounded one end of it into a soft brush, and gave it to Bapu. After using it he said, “Now cut off the used bit of the datun and pound that end into a brush again.” I said, surprised, “But why? We can get a fresh one every day.” “I know we can,” said Bapu, “but that does not mean we should. We have not the right. We must not fling away a datun until it becomes too dry to be usable.” So that was how it was done. Sometimes the brush could not be made soft enough, and the thought of Bapu’s gums and the few remaining teeth having to suffer was painful to me, but what could I do? I had been forbidden to cut a new datun until the old one had either become too small or had dried away into complete uselessness.

Thus, Bapu was not only an ideal prisoner, but also an ideal follower of the principle of ahimsa.

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Notes:

2 Yeravda is a place near Pune where Gandhi ji was imprisoned more than once by the British authorities.
3 Vallabhbhai is the first name of a senior leader of the freedom struggle days generally known as Vallabhbhai Bhai Patel. Gandhi ji always referred to him by his first name. However he was popularly addressed as Sardar Patel or Sardar.
4 Sabarmati is the well known river on both sides of which the city of Ahmedabad is located. Gandhiji’s Ashram was on the bank of Sabarmati. A major jail was also on the bank of Sabarmati and it was popularly known as Sabarmati Jail.

* Acharya Kakasaheb (Dattatreya Balkrishna) Kalelkar (1.12.1885 to 21.8.1981) was one of the close senior associates of Mahatma Gandhi at Sabarmati Ashram. He is well known as Gujarati Litterateur (though born a Maharashtrian), an educationist and highly respected interpreter of Gandhian thought. Besides he was a linguist, journalist, academician, philosopher, parliamentarian, interpreter of Tagore, and ardent advocate of emotional integration of all communities. He was appointed as Vice-Chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapith by Gandhiji. As a litterateur of all-India repute, Kakasaheb wrote over 120 books in Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi and English.

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Constructive Programme*

M.K. Gandhi

... Constructive Programme is the truthful and non-violent way of winning Poorna Swaraj. Its wholesale fulfilment is complete Independence. Imagine all the forty crores of people busying themselves with the whole of the Constructive Programme which is designed to build up the nation from the very bottom upward. Can anybody dispute the proposition that it must mean complete Independence in every sense of the expression, including the ousting of foreign domination? When the critics laugh at the proposition, what they mean is that forty crores of people will never co-operate in the effort to fulfil the programme. No doubt, there is considerable truth in the scoff. My answer is, it is still worth the attempt. Given an indomitable will on the part of a band of earnest workers, the programme is as workable as any other and more so than most. Anyway, I have no substitute for it, if it is to be based on non-violence.

Civil Disobedience, mass or individual, is an aid to constructive effort and is a full substitute for armed revolt. Training is necessary as well for civil disobedience as for armed revolt. Only the ways are different. Action in either case takes place only when occasion demands. Training for military revolt means learning the use of arms ending perhaps in the atomic bomb. For civil disobedience it means the Constructive Programme.

Therefore, workers will never be on the look-out for civil resistance. They will hold themselves in readiness, if the Constructive effort is sought to be defeated.

... There is no Swaraj without suffering. In violence, truth is the first and the greatest sufferer; in non-violence it is ever triumphant. Moreover, men composing the Government are not to be regarded as enemies. To regard them as such will be contrary to the non-violent spirit. Part we must, but as friends.

If this preliminary observation has gone home to the reader, he will find the constructive programme to be full of deep interest. It should prove as absorbing as politics so called and platform oratory, and certainly more important and useful.

Poona: 13.11.1945