

# The Wheel of Mindful Practice

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In the year 2019, the world celebrates the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. Much has been said and written about this unique human being these past decades, and every aspect of his work and writings have been minutely scrutinized. At the same time, since his assassination, the image of the Mahatma has increasingly evolved, organically, into a series of iconic images. These include the round, rimless glasses he wore, his walking stick and simple attire, but most of all, the spinning wheel, or *charkha* in the Hindustani language. As the illustrations above suggest, the spinning wheel is now indelibly associated with Gandhiji.

And that is with good reason. For the spinning wheel, and the operation of this humble household device for making homespun cotton fibre, became a central part of not just the daily routine of Mahatma Gandhi and his adherents, but for the very method of political and economic struggle that he created for India in the colonial age.

It was only upon his return to India from South Africa in 1915, and after his travel across the length and breadth of undivided India in a Third Class train, that Gandhiji started to aggressively promote the Charkha as a tool for individual, social and political transformation. By the mid-1920s, the Charkha had captured the imagination of India's people, and had emerged as a key symbol of resistance. This was primarily because Mahatma Gandhi made it simple to understand that

“Swadeshi” also meant moving away from fabric from English mills, and replacing it with coarse, homespun cloth.

Gandhiji saw in the spinning wheel a simple and yet effective method of transforming India: at one level, it created discipline and order among his followers: spinning homespun yarn is no easy task, and it required immense concentration and effort. At the same time, it emphasized the value of simple productive labour, thus making modern elites empathize with the vast majority of impoverished citizens. And it helped endorse the cause of self-sufficient, interconnected domestic production, against products from the colonial power, England.



This simple, repetitive but enormously focusing activity remains a powerful symbol of human effort, a century since Gandhiji first made this part of his daily practice.

One other benefit that the Charkha provided - which the Mahatma was quick to seize upon - was in creating a platform for calm self-reflection. In moments of greatest self-doubt or under political pressure, Gandhiji retired to his spinning wheel for hours, using focused labour and concentrated thinking as a means of dispassionate self-examination and creative thought. In other words, it served as a means of driving mindfulness, as great spiritualists have done with other similar focused activities, such as calligraphy, painting, illumination of scriptures, etc. Thus, the history of how the simple charkha emerged as a powerful symbol of India’s national movement, why it was used, and the way it became effective can be directly related to the process by

which strategic political, economic and spiritual impulses converged in the message and method of Mahatma Gandhi.

Bearing this context in mind, in our modern world, we could well consider recasting the humble spinning wheel as a mechanism to focus our minds, distracted as we are by digital media, technology and the incessant clamour for our attention from competing sources of information. Even today, the spinning wheel can be used as a means for psychological transformation, not just as a symbol of resistance (as India sometimes sees it), but also a powerful symbol of resilience, calm determination, focus, and mindfulness.



At the time, not everyone fully agreed with the Mahatma's endorsement of the Charkha. Most notable among them was the poet and Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, who expressed concern in 1925 that blind faith in the Charkha and repetitive manual work could actually demoralize the masses. While the great poet was correct in terms of the dehumanizing effect of repetitive labour when neither the labour nor its fruits are fully owned by the worker, this does not apply to the purposes and practices that Gandhiji devised. After all, he viewed Chakra spinning differently : as a mindful practice like meditation. It is repetitive in the same way an artist or a designer repeatedly reworks drawings for a product; or in the way a sportsperson trains obsessively for an event. In other words, Gandhiji's approach focused on training the mind to recognize that when there is meaningful output, the process of work need not be repetitive and therefore tedious.

Taking this approach to our current era, and to sectors like education, we can see how focused and mindful activity help children improve concentration. Indeed, children are at their best when they are spontaneously engaged in repetitive play or activity. Consider, for instance, the child playing with her lego set: the process of tediously building a house or a factory with Lego bricks can seem tiring and repetitive to an onlooker, but because the activity is at their own choice, and because its outcome

brings them satisfaction, children are happy to engage with it endlessly. As with adults, so with children: the ability to focus the mind through meaningful activity is the essence of the process of education, and thus, the portal to creativity and mindful activity. In this sense, one doesn't even need the physical charkha or the labour of spinning cloth: all one needs is the metaphorical spinning wheel of any one meaningful activity, upon which an instructor or even a child can productively focus upon. That can then help us to reach within, and find new depths to our own capacities. It is in short, one way of inspiring mindful practice, self belief and creative thinking.

The Charkha, which is the  
embodiment of willing  
obedience and calm persistence,  
must therefore succeed before  
there is civil disobedience.

Mahatma Gandhi

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