

LESSON 4

SELF SUFFERING AS AN ACT OF NONVIOLENCE

Fasting To Correct the Wrongdoers at the Phoenix Settlement

Gandhi founded a community namely Phoenix settlement in 1904 in South Africa. It was an Ashram where people lived a collective common life and who were in search of greater truths rather than worldly pleasures. The Phoenix settlement was established to practise brotherhood and simplicity. Gandhi's friends supported this project.

Many people irrespective of caste, religion, language, and nationality etc., became the members of the ashram. In 1913, a group of students of this Ashram was on the way to a railway station. At that time two students found a one Shilling coin and a three Penny coin.

They were deep in thoughts whether the money should be returned to authorities or to be used by them. Then all of them decided to send one of the student friends to Durban to buy some snacks out of that money. They made him take leave to go to Durban for buying snacks.

During these days, Gandhiji was moving between Johannesburg and Phoenix very often. It reached the ears of Gandhiji only after a few days. He had a discussion with the students and found out the truth. He told them that non-possession was the vow practised at the ashram. He expected them to return the money to authorities concerned. Gandhi also told them that keeping someone else's property, when the property does not belong to them is a grave mistake and an act of untruthfulness.

He wanted to create the thoughts and feelings about non-possession and truthfulness and thus he undertook a penitential fast for a week. He did this due to the moral lapse of the two inmates of the ashram. He wanted the students to realise and understand the sufferings of others and be without greediness. He took only one meal for a day for the next four and a half months. He announced that if the same students would do similar mistake, he would go on fast for fourteen days. He undertook this self suffering to teach the lesson of selflessness. Gandhi thought that obedience to Truth is better than sacrifice. In 1914 a similar mistake was repeated by the same boys and Gandhiji undertook a fourteen day fast to correct them.

Gandhi did not scold or use angry words to correct the boys. He did not want to hurt the boys. He only wanted a change of heart and to bring this change of heart he suffered himself. Self suffering for a change of heart in others was something he had learnt from the wounded healers.

Questions:

1. What is the name of the Ashram founded by Gandhi in South Africa?
2. Why did Gandhi make his penitential fast?
3. What is the meaning of fasting to you?
4. Do you think that the self suffering of one will correct the mistake of the near and dear ones? If so, how?