



A
GUIDE
TO

HEALTH

MAHATMA GANDHI

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Translated by

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Translator's Note

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In these days when the name of Mahatma Gandhi is identified with the momentous question of Non-Co-operation, it may come with a shock of surprise to most readers to be told that he is something of an authority on matters of Health and Disease as well. Very few of us perhaps are aware that he is the author of quite an original little Health-book in Gujarati. Those who think of him as a dreamy idealist or an unpractical visionary, with his head always in the clouds, will certainly be undeceived when they read this book replete from cover to cover with *practical* observations on the most *practical* question of Health. His views are of course radically different from the ordinary views that find expression in the pages of such books; in many cases, indeed, his doctrines must be pronounced revolutionary, and will doubtless be regarded by a certain class of readers as wholly impracticable. Even the most revolutionary of his doctrines, however, are based, not on the shifting quicksands of mere theory, but on the solid foundation of deep study, backed up by personal experience of nearly thirty years. He himself recognises that many of his views will hardly be accepted by the ordinary reader, but he has felt himself impelled by a stern sense of duty to give publicity to his convictions formed after so much of study and experience. Some at least however, of those who read his book cannot help being profoundly influenced by it. Such, at any rate, has been the case with me; and I have ventured to translate the book into English in the hope that others may also be benefitted likewise.

I should perhaps explain that I am not a student of Gujarati, the language of the original. I have used instead one of the two Hindi versions of the book. I should also point out that I have not attempted a literal or close translation, but only *a very free rendering* into English. In some cases, whole passages have been omitted; and occasionally only the general sense of a passage has been given. It is hoped, however, that, in no single instance has there been a *misinterpretation* of the original words.

I am aware that many errors might have crept in, as the translation had to be done in a hurry, and there was hardly any time for revision. I hope to make a thorough revision of the book, in case a second edition is called for.

A. Rama Iyer.
National College,
Trichinopoly,
July 1921.

Introduction

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For more than twenty years past I have been paying special attention to the question of Health. While in England, I had to make my own arrangements for food and drink, and I can say, therefore, that my experience is quite reliable. I have arrived at certain definite conclusions from that experience, and I now set them down for the benefit of my readers.

As the familiar saying goes, 'Prevention is better than cure.' It is far easier and safer to prevent illness by the observance of the laws of health than to set about curing the illness which has been brought on by our own ignorance and carelessness. Hence it is the duty of all thoughtful men to understand aright the laws of health, and the object of the following pages is to give an account of these laws. We shall also consider the best methods of cure for some of the most common diseases.

As Milton says, the mind can make a hell of heaven or a heaven of hell. So heaven is not somewhere above the clouds, and hell somewhere underneath the earth! We have this same idea expressed in the Sanskrit saying, *Mana êva Manushayanâm Kâranam Bandha Mokshayoh*—man's captivity or freedom is dependant on the state of his mind. From this it follows that whether a man is healthy or unhealthy depends on himself. Illness is the result not only of our actions but also of our thoughts. As has been said by a famous doctor, more people die for fear of diseases like small-pox, cholera and plague than out of those diseases themselves.

Ignorance is one of the root-causes of disease. Very often we get bewildered at the most ordinary diseases out of sheer ignorance, and in our anxiety to get better, we simply make matters worse. Our ignorance of the most elementary laws of health leads us to adopt wrong remedies or drives us into the hands of the veriest quacks. How strange (and yet how true) it is that we know much less about things near at hand than things at a distance. We know hardly anything of our own village, but we can give by rote the names of the rivers and mountains of England! We take so much trouble to learn the names of the stars in the sky, while we hardly think it worth while to know the things that are in our own homes! We never care a jot for the splendid pageantry of Nature before our very eyes, while we are so anxious to witness the puerile mummeries of the theatre! And in the same way, we are not ashamed to be ignorant of the structure of our body, of the way in which the bones and muscles, grow, how the blood circulates and is rendered impure, how we are affected by evil thoughts and passions, how our mind travels over illimitable spaces and times while the body is at rest, and so on. There is nothing so closely connected with us as our body, but there is also nothing perhaps of which our ignorance is so profound, or our indifference so complete.

It is the duty of every one of us to get over this indifference. Everyone should regard it as his bounden duty to know something of the fundamental facts concerning his body. This kind of instruction should indeed be made compulsory in our schools. At present, we know not how to deal with the most ordinary scalds and wounds; we are helpless if a thorn runs into our foot; we are beside ourselves with fright and dismay if we are bitten by an ordinary snake! Indeed, if we consider the depth of our ignorance in such matters, we shall have to hang down our heads in shame. To assert that the average man cannot be expected to know these

things is simply absurd. The following pages are intended for such as are willing to learn.

I do not pretend that the facts mentioned by me have not been said before. But my readers will find here in a nutshell the substance of several books on the subject. I have arrived at my conclusions after studying these books, and after a series of careful experiments. Moreover, those who are new to this subject will also be saved the risk of being confounded by the conflicting views held by writers of such books. One writer says for instance, that hot water is to be used under certain circumstances, while another writer says that, exactly under the same circumstances, cold water is to be used. Conflicting views of this kind have been carefully considered by me, so that my readers may rest assured of the reliability of my own views.

We have got into the habit of calling in a doctor for the most trivial diseases. Where there is no regular doctor available, we take the advice of mere quacks. We labour under the fatal delusion that no disease can be cured without medicine. This has been responsible for more mischief to mankind than any other evil. It is of course, necessary that our diseases should be cured, but they cannot be cured *by medicines*. Not only are medicines merely useless, but at times even positively harmful. For a diseased man to take drugs and medicines would be as foolish as to try to cover up the filth that has accumulated in the inside of the house. The more we cover up the filth, the more rapidly does putrefaction go on. The same is the case with the human body. Illness or disease is only Nature's warning that filth has accumulated in some portion or other of the body; and it would surely be the part of wisdom to allow Nature to remove the filth, instead of covering it up by the help of medicines. Those who take medicines are really rendering the task of Nature doubly difficult. It is, on the other hand, quite easy for us to help Nature in her task by remembering certain

elementary principles,—by fasting, for instance, so that the filth may not accumulate all the more, and by vigorous exercise in the open air, so that some of the filth may escape in the form of perspiration. And the one thing that is supremely necessary is to keep our minds strictly under control.

We find from experience that, when once a bottle of medicine gets itself introduced into a home, it never thinks of going out, but only goes on drawing other bottles in its train. We come across numberless human beings who are afflicted by some disease or other all through their lives in spite of their pathetic devotion to medicines. They are to-day under the treatment of this doctor, to-morrow of that. They spend all their life in a futile search after a doctor who will cure them for good. As the late Justice Stephen (who was for some time in India) said, it is really astonishing that drugs of which so little is known should be applied by doctors to bodies of which they know still less! Some of the greatest doctors of the West themselves have now come to hold this view. Sir Astley Cooper, for instance, admits that the 'science' of medicine is mostly mere guess-work; Dr. Baker and Dr. Frank hold that more people die of medicines than of diseases; and Dr. Masongood even goes to the extent of saying that more men have fallen victims to medicine than to war, famine and pestilence combined!

It is also a matter of experience that diseases increase in proportion to the increase in the number of doctors in a place. The demand for drugs has become so widespread that even the meanest papers are sure of getting advertisements of quack medicines, if of nothing else. In a recent book on the Patent Medicines we are told that the Fruit-salts and syrups, for which we pay from Rs. 2 to Rs. 5, cost to their manufacturers only from a quarter of an anna to one anna! No wonder, then, that their compositions should be so scrupulously kept a secret.

We will, therefore, assure our readers that there is absolutely no necessity for them to seek the aid of doctors. To those, however, who may not be willing to boycott doctors and medicines altogether, we will say, "As far as possible, possess your souls in patience, and do not trouble the doctors. In case you are forced at length to call in the aid of a doctor, be sure to get a good man; then, follow his directions strictly, and do not call in another doctor, unless by his own advice. But remember, above all, that the curing of your disease does not rest ultimately in the hands of any doctor."

M. K. Gandhi.

PART I - GENERAL

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