

TO ASHRAM SISTERS

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Punctuality

Wardha,

Day of silence (Monday)

Sisters, The first thing for me to do after breakfast is to write you a letter. It is now five to seven; you are therefore all on your way to the prayer hall. You have to be punctual in reaching the hall at the fixed time. Those of you who have promised to attend the prayer daily should make it a point to be present except in circumstances beyond your control. I have suggested to Ramniklal that he should explain one or two verse from the Gita every Day. But you are of course free to read something of your own choice. Keep up the habit of writing, and always try to improve your hand. But all these things are not an end in themselves; they are only means to an end. The end is performance of one's allotted duty. The whole duty of man is to wish well and to do good to others. And as the first step towards discharging it, you should learn to love one another as your own blood sisters, and share one another's sorrows as well as joys.

Bapu's blessing

The whole duty of Man-Prayer

Wardha,

Magshar shudi 11 [1983]

Today also I remember you after breakfast. It is just 6:50, time for your prayer. We may miss many things in life but not prayer, which implies our co-operation with God and with one another. Prayer should be a bath of purification for the spirit of man. Physical health suffers if we do not wash our bodies; similarly the spirit becomes unclean if the heart is not washed with prayer. Please therefore never be negligent in prayer.

The life of... provides an object lesson for you.... she fills up every second of her time with purposeful activity. All of you should try to reach the same height of devotion, renunciation, and purity. Is it too much to expect that you will spread all over India after you have finished your training for service? I realize our lack of sisters of mercy every moment. Very few women come out to serve their fellow countrymen. Women are the very incarnation of service, but at present they minister only to their own families. Why should they not extend the field of their ministry so as to embrace the whole of India? A truly religious person becomes a citizen of the world, but the service of one's own country is the stepping-stone to the service of humanity. And where service is rendered to the country consistently with the welfare of the world, it finally leads to self-realization (moksha).

Sisters of Mercy

[January 1927]

...At the women's meeting yesterday, I started a fresh piece of propaganda. Women here [in North Bihar] wear heavy ornaments of silver, do not comb their hair, and keep their children dirty. I therefore condemned the wearing of jewellery, with the result that some of the sisters gave away their anklets and necklaces on condition that an account should the jewellery donated be replaced. While receiving these gifts, I remembered all of you down there, for you could do this kind of work very much more effectively than I. And you must equip yourselves for it by renunciation and devotion. Ba has been very helpful to me these days.

Atmavat Sarvabhuteshu! That is, we must entertain the same regard for others as we have for ourselves. And if we did, we would be ashamed to find other people's children dirty, as we would be if they were our own. So also if we found others in distress, we would make that distress our own and try to relieve it.

Paush shudi 14.

Wearing of Jewellery

[January 1927]

It is in the fitness of things that you have elected Gangaben as your president. But may I suggest that after electing your president you have to help her to fulfill the duties of her office? Gangaben is illiterate; still you have rightly appointed her president out of regard for her character. Rest assured that literary education is no good without character. President means chief servant. A ruler can issue orders only if he has acquired the highest qualification for service. His orders should be intended not to advance his own interest but the welfare of society. Rulers nowadays have lost sight of their duty, so that instead of setting an example of selflessness and devotion they give themselves up to pleasures and use their powers as an instrument of self-indulgence. But you have therefore resolved that Gangaben should be your leader in your endeavour to qualify as sisters of mercy.

Character

Betia, 1983 Paush vadi 6

If at the Ashram we cannot train sisters for lifelong service to the country, where else can we hope to do so? It is true that you have not health and strength, self-confidence, or the literary education requisite for the purpose. But if you have true bhakti (devotion), all these things will be added unto you. Bhakti means faith in God and in ourselves as His instruments, and it enables us to renounce for the mere sake of renunciation. A mother would never by choice sleep in a wet bed to spare the dry bed for the child.

Devotion

Malvan, Magh Wadi 11

There is always a women's meeting during the tour. I am therefore gathering fresh experience everyday. I feel that women hold the keys of Swaraj in their hands. But who will bring about an awakening among them? Multitudes of women live in idleness; who will induce them to take to industry? Mothers spoil their children from their infancy, and load them with ornaments and superfluous clothes. They marry their young girls to old men. I am deeply pained when I see women heavily bedecked with ornaments. Who will explain to them that these tinkers are no aid to beauty? Real beauty is the beauty of the soul. And so on. But what is the remedy? The remedy will be readily found when some strong-willed Draupadi is thrown up by our people. You should resolve and try to acquire such capacity. Patience and perseverance overcome mountains.

Wanted a woman

Chaitra Wadi 9

There are men in the Ashram as well as women, but supposing that the men were out one day and thieves came to the Ashram, what would all of you do? Have you ever thought about this? If you haven't, think of it now and let me know what you would do. How I wish you would falsify epithets like abala [the weaker sex] and bhiru [the timid one], which are applied to women!

Neither Male nor Female

[Vaishakha shudi 1]

These epithets cannot properly be applied to all women, as for instance to women among the Raniparaj or to the women in the west are doing much work that was supposed to be reserved for men. I do not mean that all their activities are worthy of imitation, but they have certainly upset many calculations of mere men. In Burma women manage everything. At the Ashram we are striving for self-realization. The soul is neither male nor female, neither young nor old. These attributes belong to the body alone, as both scripture and experience testify. The soul is the same in both you and me. Therefore who am I to protect you? Only, if I have mastered the art of life, I have to teach it to you.

Fear and Faith

Nandi, Vaishakha shudi 15

I am very glad to know that you are not subject to fear. Why should one who knows that God is there to protect us all be afraid? But His protection does not mean that we may not be robbed or that we may not be bitten by a snake. Such incidents do not show that He protects us any the less but that we had not enough faith in Him. The river is always willing to give its water to all, but how is the river to be blamed if or does not go near it believing the water to be poisonous? All fear is a sign of want of faith. But faith cannot be acquired by force of intellect. It comes but slowly after deep meditation and continuous practice. We pray, sing hymns, read books, seek the association of men of God, and perform the spinning sacrifice in order to attain that faith.

Work among women

Nandi, Vaishakha Wadi 13

Does Miraben write to you occasionally? I can see from her letters that she is doing a great deal of work among the women as well as men. I will let you know one of the points in her letters. She writes that she finds all the sisters she meets very goodhearted, but their ignorance is terrible. These sisters do not know even the simplest thing. If she talks to them about the spinning wheel, they are surprised, and they do not understand the idea of plying it for the poor. Religion for them is only worship in the temple. They hardly know what service means. This impression may be due to her not understanding them fully. But we do know how our womenfolk are ignorant of even ordinary things. Though the responsibility for this ignorance rests with men, women must prepare to cure this evil. This is the task before you. I want all of you sisters to fit yourselves for it according to your capacity.

Sanskrit with Music

I hope you are pronouncing the shlokas correctly, though we shall not be called to account for reciting the name of God incorrectly. God is a searcher of hearts only. If our hearts are pure, we will get full marks even if we stutter in our speech. Writing about this, I may describe the pleasant experience we are having here. Mysore is a part of Karnatak which has given us Kaka Saheb. Sisters here know Sanskrit and music very well. I heard their songs at Nandi, and the day before yesterday two sisters here sang in correct Sanskrit pronunciation a summary of the Ramayana. I think there were more than 100 shlokas. I could not detect a single mistake in them. One of them is still a student, and she knows the meaning of the verse also. But why am I writing to you about this? I value the work you are doing at present more than the study of Sanskrit. Become sisters of mercy, fearless and pure, and work as a team. This is a better education than any other. If a study of Sanskrit and music could be added on to it, of course so much the better.

Contacts with labourers

Bhadrapada vadi

I am sure you have understood why I want you to make contacts with the labourers at the Ashram. To collect a few coppers from each of them for the relief fund is merely an occasion for making them kinsmen. You should work for mutual good understanding and share one another's joys and sorrows. You need not give much of your time for this. What is wanted is a change of heart. We should aim at feeding them with the kind of food we eat, and clothing them with the same dress as we wear. We should wish that they had a share in all the good things that we like and obtain for ourselves, and work for such a consummation.

Do not be frightened by the wide implication of these views of mine. There are always two meanings to everything, one wider and the other narrower. We shall not be put out if we understand the wider implications but start with the narrower.

The principle of action

Trichinapalli

I visualize from here the work you are doing. Whoever works according to her capacity has fulfilled her mission. But in your work you must cultivate that attitude of mind which is inculcated in the Gita. That is to do everything with a view to serve or as an offering to God, you will never have the feeling "I am doing this." You will not then have ill-will for anybody and you will be generous to others. You should always ask yourselves whether your smallest action is guided by these principles.