Gandhi's Theory of Society and Our Times

By:
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GANDHI is a world-historical figure. Though he refused to formulate a religious or philosophical system, he did stand, throughout his life, for certain ideas, which are nothing if not of universal significance. In order to see this clearly, let us review, very briefly, the nature and context of the challenge to which his life and thought were a dedicated response.

Within the limited scope of this essay, it is not possible to begin at the beginning of Gandhi's political career in South Africa; we cannot even review his role in the Indian independence movement in any systematic way. All that can be done here is to indicate some salient features of India's freedom struggle at the time Gandhi entered the scene as a major figure after World War I.

The Indian freedom movement was a number of different things at the same time. It was a reform, a renaissance and a nationalist movement. At the same time it was also a movement for religious revivalism under the name of Hindu nationalism. At the time Gandhi came on the Indian political scene, it was dominated by Gokhale and Tilak: Gokhale leading the reformist and secularist or non-religious form of nationalism and Tilak leading the religio-social revivalist interpretation of the nationalist movement. The tension that developed between Gokhale and Tilak, as leaders of the Indian freedom struggle, reflected something far deeper than a clash of personalities. It signified the essential incompatibility between the idea of nationalism and Hinduism, and for that matter, Islam. In other words, while Hindu nationalism or Islamic nationalism is a contradiction in terms, both nationalism and Hinduism had necessarily to be emphasized by the anti-Imperialist forces in the Indian political and social movement. At one level, Hinduism and Hindu society are inseparable and hence to strengthen or weaken the one has profound significance for the other. Now Hindu society being a caste society, an outcaste, though a Hindu is really an outsider and hence he can be easily lured into other religions. For this reason certain reforms became necessary and urgent, for Hinduism at this time was being threatened not only by Christianity and Islam, but also by Western rationalism. But this reform of Hinduism had at the same time to be a kind of revivalism, for that was the only way to unify, to get a collective identity and to rouse and gear the society to act against foreign rule. In other words, in the specific historical context of India under modern Western imperial rule Reformist and Modernist forces could work only within very narrow limitations. Thus Gokhale's correct non-religious interpretation of nationalism was bound to develop serious inner tensions in the Indian situation—for given the history of Hindu-Muslim relations, it was impossible to forge a truly national identity in terms of a common historical past. Hence there was not only the appeal, but a kind of irrefutability in Tilak's idea of nationalism as the completion of Sivaji's task—an interpretation, however, which can have meaning only within Hinduism and must be

rejected by the Muslims. This inner schism in the freedom-cum-nationalist movement of India has persisted all the way down to our time. After Gokhale and Tilak, the two inconsistent aspects of the nationalist movement were represented by Nehru and Patel, and even though Patel died in 1950 the idealogical forces which he represented are very much alive and strong.

The immediate successor of both Gokhale and Tilak was, of course, Gandhi. How did he heal, or at any rate, deal with this inner schism?

Gandhi's response to this crucial challenge was threefold. He radically changed the basis, the scope and the nature of the Indian freedom movement.

Basis: With Gandhi the Indian National Congress became a people's party. At any rate, it ceased to be confined to upper and middle educated classes.

Scope: He universalized the scope of Indian politics, emphasizing the world-historical character of the Indian struggle as representing the struggle of the oppressed and the exploited against all oppressors and exploiters. He thought of himself as fighting for a better world-order and not simply for a free India. Indeed, until comparatively late in his political career, he did not emphasize so much the freedom of India, as he did a reformed British Commonwealth in which India could be a self-respecting and valuable partner. In his own view, the Indian movement was not national but universal-human—one global in scope and paralleling the Marxist movement.

Nature: Gandhi changed the nature of Indian politics by spiritualizing it. By this I refer to the Gandhian principles of Truth and Non-violence as the basis of social order and the instruments of socio-political dynamics. In other words, Gandhi stood for the substitution of Power politics by Goodness politics in terms of his doctrine of the integrality and symmetry of ends and means. Gandhi repudiated the idea that morality is simply an individual affair; on the contrary he emphasized the idea that a moral and spiritual social order was a *sine qua non* for human life at its proper level. Accordingly, he firmly believed in and straightforwardly advocated a socio-economic order and a political system based on the traditional virtues: *Satya* (Truth), *Ahimsa* (Non-violence), *Aparigraha* (non-possession), *Asteya* (Non-covetousness), and *Brahmacharya* (Self-control of the senses and the sex impulse particularly).

The significance of this threefold Gandhian revolution can hardly be exaggerated. It is crucial not only for understanding the nature, the success and the failure of the Indian freedom movement but also and no less importantly, for understanding the relevance of Gandhism to contemporary India and the world. Suffer me to offer a brief analysis of this Gandhian revolution:

First, by emphasizing the people, their needs and aspirations, he at one stroke cut through the Gokhale/Tilak or the Rationalism/ Tradition, or the Reform/Revival antitheses. To the masses Hindu or Muslim or Sikh or Buddhist or Christian religion was real and meaningful: thus by emphasizing the truth in Hinduism and Islam, indeed in all religions, and by extending political thought and action from the classes to the common people, the peasantry, he modified in a major way the nature of both Indian Nationalism and Hindu revivalism. He sought to accomplish the dual transformation by taking the religiousness and misery of the Indian common people as the given basis for a

community of fate; the specific religious differences between Hinduism and Islam he attempted to resolve by a transcendent religion, or rather by a spiritual catholicism. In effect, Gandhi sought to minimize the twin problems of unity and identity of India which, he rightly thought, were at the root of the tension between nationalism and revivalism. His method was to universalize the perspective for the identity problem, so that the specific burden of India's history would not be felt as a dead weight. This was reinforced by the effect of his second revolution, namely the universalization of the freedom struggle, making his ideal essentially the foundation of a new stage in human history. It thus undermines the idea of nationalism which is both parochial and retrograde when viewed independently of its colonial or anti-imperialist context.

The viability of the second revolution depends in fact on his third revolution: the spiritualisation of politics. This is the foundation of Gandhi's thought. If there can be a goodness politics, then the idea of nation-states can be used creatively: in the absence of a spiritual social-political order, as distinguished from a religious one, the concept of nation must be maintained for the solution of the identity problem, that is if a universal context is not found, one able to replace the imperial context. Religion and Communism have supplied so far the supra-national context for unity and identity. In his idea of spiritualization of politics Gandhi seeks to provide a renewal and a reinterpretation of the religious context which will at the same time supersede the Communist context. He attempted to do this by going beyond both the modern Western theory of the State as the embodiment of the will of the people, and the Hindu theory of State as the embodiment of the Dharma. He thought of non-violence and truth as the foundation of State as well as of social order, interpreting these as universal spiritual principles independent of all formulated religions. The idea, however, led him ultimately to the theory of a stateless society—a development that paralleled the Marxist theory of the withering away of the state. Though Gandhi was never a Marxist, this parallelism is not a mere chance convergence: it is inherent in all universalization of politics. Another concept that Gandhi evolved in his effort to provide a non-Marxian solution to the inherent problems of modern politico-social theory is that of trusteeship. In Gandhian thinking it has two fundamental roles: socio-economically, the concept of trusteeship is designed to prevent a productive society from becoming acquisitive and exploitative, and politically it is meant to resolve a major difficulty in the modern Western theory of democracy. The difficulty is this: the relationship between the State (Ruler) and the People (Ruled) in a democratic socio-political system ought not to be that of guardian and ward, doctor-patient, educator-educated. However, in modern democratic societies this is precisely the nature of the relation between the State and the people. Indeed the key institution of modern democratic process, viz. leadership may, strictly speaking, be said to be undemocratic, a point often indirectly conceded through opposition to what is called the cult of personality and through proposals for collective leadership. Indeed, the more technologically advanced a society is, the more have the people to be managed, the greater the need for protection, and thus the relation between the people and the State tends to be increasingly that of ward and guardian.

The Gandhian theory of trusteeship tries to resolve this dilemma by replacing the concept of representation by that of trusteeship. However, for this change of concepts to have more than a terminological significance it is necessary that the idea of trusteeship be an organic part of the Gandhian theory of a society based both individually and

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collectively on the virtues of self-suffering and non-possession. This approach was profound, broad-based, farsighted, and a failure. Gandhi himself was the most self-aware, anguished and undespairing witness to the grandeur and misery of his life's work: the grandeur, transfer of power to India, largely through a non-violent freedom struggle; the misery, the communal disharmony culminating in the partition of India.

Gandhi wanted two things: the restoration of a spiritual or normal social order in India and by extension in the world, and secondly to free India from foreign rule; this freedom according to Gandhi was a pre-condition for his first goal.

He did not succeed. For Gandhi the partition robbed India's freedom of its full truth and the socio-historical process culminating in the post-independence Indian society signified the failure of his main mission: the spiritual renewal of man.

Too saintly to lose faith and too great to feel frustrated, Gandhi nevertheless knew that his vision had suffered a great setback; indeed, he knew this with a clarity rare among the great.

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If Gandhi was simply a survival produced by the liberal, civilized British rule in India, if his cardinal spiritual quest and mission were in the last analysis a clever Hindu's embellishments of his political struggle and hence a distraction for the social scientist, if Gandhi was just a parochial figure trying to do something good to the Hindu character under colonial rule—in a word, if the failure of Gandhi and the failure of the Gandhian idea are synonymous, then Gandhi's life and thought are irrelevant to our times. And if I, for one, believed this, I would see no reason to be interested in talking at all about Gandhi or Gandhism.

If, however, the threefold Gandhian revolution about which we have been speaking constitutes a real revolution with world-historical significance, if Gandhi was *not* just a colonial leader who happened to achieve some kind of world fame, but, on the contrary, is a universal figure with relentless and steadfast concern with the destiny of man, then the central question raised by Gandhi, his thought, life and work, is the question of its relevance to our times and this is nothing else or no less than this: Has the voice of sanity any chance at all against the dark, demonic powers of our times?

It is a terrible question. Apart from the fact that like everybody else I am deeply involved in the question, I have no competence to answer it. What I have to say in the rest of the space available to me is nothing more than an analysis of the question itself. Let me repeat, the observations that follow make no claim to answering the question that has just been put. All I attempt to do is to explore a little the implications of this question from the Gandhian standpoint. I said that to ask the question of the contemporary relevance of Gandhism is really to ask the question about society and survival. To see this, and to understand the question of Gandhism's contemporary relevance in its proper perspective, it is essential to speak briefly about the Gandhian vision of a normal society—the kind of society for which Gandhi lived and died.

Gandhi did not believe in the coexistence of moral man and immoral society. In fact, one of his most important contributions to political thought and action is the idea that ways of moral action and resistance could be transferred from the individual to the

collective plane and be used as powerful forms of political action. Indeed, the technique of *Satyagraha* (fast, civil disobedience, *dharna*[1] and other variants) presuppose this basic idea. Gandhi believed that Society could be, and should be moral. Did he also hold that man as an individual needed a moral society in order to be moral himself? I think this is a fundamental point in understanding Gandhi's sociological thought. Let us therefore ponder it a moment.

Gandhi was a great believer in the virtues of compromise, not only in the political but in almost all spheres; it was part of his political theory and practice to lay the greatest stress on sincerity and the purity of the personal lives of every political actor. In a more general way, too, he gave all possible emphasis and attention to political participants as persons. Looking at his thought and practice from this point of view, it may look as if Gandhi did not rule out the possibility of moral men in a not-so-moral society. In further support of such an interpretation of Gandhi's thought, it could be pointed out that the ultimate orientation of Gandhi's political action was towards effecting a change of heart of the other party. Both his thinking and the forms of political action that he developed imply, it may be argued, a cumulative process of social change.

All this is correct. However, I would like to argue that this does not invalidate my thesis that Gandhi did not think that individually man could be moral in a non-moral, immoral or unjust society, that is, he did not believe in the Niebuhrian antithesis of moral man and immoral society. I want to show that in any analysis of his thought and work the coexistence (of moral man and immoral society) theory would be seriously misleading.

Gandhi did place man as person in the forefront. But this was only a powerful and realistic way of focussing attention on what may be called the principle of normalcy.

A normal society is simply a society. Opposed to it are what have been called mass-society and mass man—and mass—or what is currently called "pop" culture. The mass and the society used to be contrary to each other. They have been hyphenated today.

A society has an intelligible order and an overall purpose. A mass lacks both. It follows that members of a society have their own place and function in it. Not so in a mass.

A society whose members are humans is a human society. When man is called a social animal, the reference obviously is to his innate love of order and purpose and not to any "herd" instinct or some "natural" inclination for the company of his own kind. For these propensities are by no means exclusively human. Man, unlike many other animals, cannot suffer to live merely as a unit, for the love of order *and* Purpose are given to him in his self-consciousness.

Those who talk of mass-society certainly recognize the distinction between mass and society. They are often aware—implicitly, if not always explicitly,—that mass undermines society. They understand that the mass-man is not human—at least not fully human. They had learnt to admire certain things, certain states of affairs, certain states of mind which they conceptualized as civilization. They now realize that the mass will destroy this civilization more effectively, in fact, than any barbarian onslaught could ever do. They are not unaware that the barbarian has entered the soul. Somewhere at some time modern man was lured into the magician's bargain: Give up your soul, get power

over everything in return. Anxiously aware of the deadening influence of this demonic deal, modern thinkers are nonetheless too much under its spell to believe in the possibility of its total repudiation. Through a variety of ideas they search for a synthesis of mass and society, that is, of the infra-human and the human: they are exploring the possibility of a mass that will have just enough of the social to save it from withering away.

Gandhi wanted to break the spell. He would disown and destroy this diabolic bond. Herein lies the basic difference between Gandhi's critique of modern society and those of most other modern thinkers. And what is even more important, this also defines the difference between Gandhi and Gandhism in India today.

Gandhi was against "mass-society". He was uncompromisingly opposed to the modern industrial technological society and civilization. He knew what forces, what propensities underlie such a socio-cultural system; and unlike most contemporary thinkers and leaders, he remained relentlessly consistent and thoroughgoing in his opposition to these forces. He went to the root of the matter and attacked the very concept of a rising standard of living. He could see most clearly what this really meant, viz., a continually rising standard of consumption even to the point when rapid, built-in obsolescence and wanton destruction become the controlling principles of the economy. In opposition to this economic theory, he boldly set up the theory of *Aparigraha* (non-possession, non-acquisitiveness) and the minimisation of wants. The principle of Aparigraha, it is to be noted, is one that emphasizes the present and hence it severely limits the cumulative process and thus undermines a capitalist as well as a State-planned `Socialist' production system. Indeed, the ideas of minimal wants and of non-possession pre-suppose a world outlook that is quite incompatible with the currently accepted ideology for a planned society.

It is in this context that Gandhi's emphasis on the individual person should be understood. From the Gandhian point of view the modern industrial-technological mass-society is really a collectivity of sub-humans. Gandhi thought steadfastly in terms of a society of men: a society in which there will be no mechanical equality, but at the same time nobody will be forced to live at a subhuman level; a society in which every member will be a full member according to his own place and specific competence.

Contrary to a prevalent interpretation, I think that Gandhi did not believe in the individual as the source of social change. Absolutely believing in God and Providential guidance, Gandhi thought that man could only be an instrument of God's will. He emphasized purity of heart and mind so that one could attain to the highest point of human creativity and get a correct intimation of the divine will and act efficiently according to it. Gandhi believed that a suprahuman order was the common ground of both man and society. Given this frame of reference, the antithesis of man and society could not arise, unless one held, as Gandhi *did not,* that a social order could not be built on moral and metaphysical principles like truth and non-violence. In fact, a whole social order based on truth and non-violence—and not merely individual truthfulness and non-violence—is the very cornerstone of Gandhian sociology.

In summary form, the Gandhian socio-economic system can be described in terms of the following ideas and principles:

Means and ends should be seen as parts of a whole which has a transcendental reference.

The productive system should be based on the principle of optimal minimisation of needs (and not on that of multiplication of wants).

The economy should be life-centred (and not one that is oriented to commodity-production). This means that the socio-economic system should operate on the principle of a metaphysically grounded optimum (and not on the principle of maximisation).

Consequently, it is to be a non-exploitative economy based on simple and limited technology.

Social and economic organization should be decentralized based on the principle of optimum autonomy.

Truth and non-violence should form the foundation of the political order.

Satyagraha (the determined pursuit of truth or the right path) should be the chief form of political vigilance and protest.

Both the social and economic systems should be hierarchical, non-competitive and non-acquisitive, based on the principle of trusteeship. Ideally it should be a stateless society.

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What has been the impact on our times of Gandhian economics and sociology, or better, of Gandhi's life and thought as a whole? The question has two parts, the first about the role of Gandhi's ideas in the independence movement of India and the second about the relevance of Gandhism to Free India and to our times in general.

The role of Gandhi and his ideas in the Indian freedom movement is greatly important; however to determine the precise nature of his role and its relation with other factors and forces operating to shape that movement is by no means an easy task. It requires difficult and careful analysis which I cannot attempt here. However, it must be pointed out that even though throughout his life Gandhi thought and worked in the context of a relentless struggle against imperialist forces, the question of the contemporary relevance of his thought is not bound by this historical context. In other words, the question of the validity of Gandhism is inseparable from that of its universality.

I say this for two closely related reasons. First, Gandhi's thought and work developed in the context of an encounter between India and the West, tradition and modernity, and his stand was not simply that the Indians should not be forced to accept Western civilisation through British rule; much more important was his conviction that the modern industrial-technological civilisation is not good for man, Eastern or Western. He increasingly made India's freedom struggle something subsidiary to a struggle and movement for a normal world society. Second, the principles on which he based his political action as well as those in terms of which he constructed his vision of free India were universal by their very nature; and Gandhi always made it clear that he did not regard his fundamental ideas as merely matters of policy or suitable strategy in the Indian freedom struggle.

To return to the question of the impact of Gandhism. In my opinion, Gandhi's life and thought were completely repudiated by Independent India. I am aware that Nehru often denied this but I do not know what he was talking about. If the present interpretation of the essentials of Gandhi's social, political and economic thought is correct, the state-planned centralized industrial-technological society which India adopted as her goal is quite contrary to Gandhi's vision of free India. As to the political order, non-violence and truth have not at all been accepted as its foundation. In fact, today there is a great deal of violence simply in running the Government: much more than any democratic people should tolerate, whether or not they believe in non-violence. Gandhi would not have supported a government which needed this kind of violence as its sanction not only in extreme situations, but for its day-to-day running. And, in the so-called conquest of Goa, the Government of India explicitly, though unnecessarily, repudiated truth and non-violence as principles of state policy.

It is often said that Gandhi was not wholly uncompromising in his doctrine of non-violence, that he would make exceptions, that, in fact, he did not oppose the Kashmir war in 1947. Such a view rests on a complete misunderstanding. I think it can be confidently stated that Gandhi made no exceptions whatsoever to his doctrine of truth and non-violence. A full defence of the above statement will need another article; however a brief explanation may be attempted here.

Non-violence sounds as if it were a negative concept, but it is not. It is violence that is negative in nature; for essentially every violent act or thought violates reality. All violence is fundamentally violence against reality. Non-violence is thus acceptance of reality as it is. This is why Gandhi always emphasizes the equation—indeed, the essential synonymy—of non-violence and truth.

In the sphere of human relationship—leaving aside for the moment that of man-nature relationship—violence arises only when there is a failure of rational communication: it is one of the forms of infra-rational communication. So, in all such situations, instead of violence, Gandhi recommended, without exception, resort to non-violence. What does this mean? It means this: that when parties to a situation do not see the relevant reality in a mutually acceptable way, the believer in non-violence, that is one who wants to accept reality-as-it-is, will voluntarily undertake to suffer for his vision of reality. (That is, instead of trying forcibly to impose it on the other party, he will accept temporarily the other party's view of reality under protest and on pain of self-suffering). This will bring about a change of heart and mind in the other party, or in the sufferer, or in both: and thus a common vision of reality will emerge eliminating any imposition of a supervening reality by the use of superior physical force.

This implies that non-violence can only be an expression of the inner truth of the non-violent actor. Otherwise, his suffering cannot be said to be really voluntary, for if it (non-violence) is not the externalization of his inner vision, it can only be something forced upon him by external and even extraneous circumstances.

This is why Gandhi said that when non-violence does not express the inner truth of the person, it will be cowardly to stick to it. If the unity of truth and non-violence is disrupted and a choice is to be made between the two, Gandhi would be for truth. In other words, he preferred a straightforward and honest rejection of a fundamental principle to

its half-hearted or insincere acceptance and lukewarm, opportunistic or compulsive application.

By the dictum, "rather kill than be a coward", Gandhi expressed his refusal to compromise with the purity of non-violence. He did not mean any approval of violence in assorted situations. This is why he stood steadfastly for a non-exploitative socio-economic order, for he understood perfectly well that violence is built into an exploitative social system. And holding fast to the doctrine of integrality of means and ends, he adhered throughout to the view that a technology-centred socio-economic system could not but be exploitative.

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Do Vinoba Bhave and his movement represent the Gandhian spirit today? I wish it were possible to answer this question with a plain "yes" or "no". Unfortunately, the position is complicated. Even though in his vision of a normal human society Vinoba seems committed to the Gandhian principles, I think there are crucial differences between his thinking and that of Gandhi.

In his later thinking Vinoba has been inclined to emphasize the purely instrumental nature of technology and modern natural science. He distinguishes extensive, constructive and destructive types of technology and is really opposed only to the last type. He believes in the well-known argument that technology by itself is just a set of means; hence everything depends upon how and for what ends it is used. He also believes that man can develop the kind of spiritual power that can contain and control technology and technological power. He thinks that the Hindu tradition (in fact, all traditions) is not yet complete in its development. He hopes for a future develop-ment of metaphysics and religion which will be a synthesis of spirituality, science and technology.

In this article I cannot examine this theory in any systematic manner. It may be pointed out, however, that Vinoba's thinking is inconsistent here, for its violates the principle of the integrality of means and ends which he does accept. In other words, Vinoba fails to see that a technological system is not a free gift from Above or from the U.S.A., to be used in the chosen manner; it has to be produced by the society which uses it, and its *production,* apart from *use,* alters the nature of that society. A society based on the principles of the minimization of wants and non-possession is a society with a low level of technological development; it cannot be otherwise. By the same token, if one wants a Gandhian society, one has to be opposed to the development and production of technology beyond a certain fairly low level.

In talking about spirituality, natural science and technology, we must remember that the essential (spiritual) question is not, How and for what purpose is technological power to be used? The crucial question is: What kind of power and in what measure ought Man to acquire it? It seems to me that Vinoba's views on modern natural science and technology are not sufficiently sensitive to the traditional principle that man's knowledge must never exceed his being.

The other fundamental departure from Gandhian principles is Vinoba's support for a government which bases itself on a fundamental. negation of the principles of Gandhism and *Sarvodaya.* Whether the revolution for which Vinoba is working should necessarily

involve a large-scale non-violent movement aiming at the complete overthrow of the present government is an open question. In any case, it can certainly be argued that it is not the only alternative in the present situation. However, what cannot be justified, I think, is the open and positive support Vinoba gave to the government over the Indo-Pakistan War (1965). Nor is it possible to understand why Vinoba and other Sarvodaya leaders have not yet straightforwardly rejected and opposed the government's socio-economic principles and plans.

I can only briefly touch upon the question of the impact of Gandhism on the contemporary Western world. I think the most important thing to note here is the general narrowness of the Western response. Gandhism calls for a radical revolution, for a complete transformation of man's thinking and way of life, social as well as individual. In a word, it aims at *metanoia.* But apart from the theoretical interest of certain European philosophers like Arne Naess, the major western interest in Gandhi, when it is not historical or aesthetic, is predominantly in Gandhian techniques that may be tried for resolving certain prob-lems and tensions of the modern society for which local methods have been proving increasingly inadequate.

With Gandhism as a way of life, that is, with a Gandhian socio-economic system, the West so far has been concerned only rarely. By and large, its interest in Gandhism and non-violent techniques has been experimental in nature and approach.

By virtue of its all-embracing scope and radical nature, the Gandhian vision is an alternative to the two dominant world-views today: the liberal democratic and the Marxian. The one question about Gandhism and our times is, therefore, simply this: Can Gandhism work as the new world-view? Is there a possibility of a radical change in the orientation and structure of contemporary society? Can we hope for *metanoia?*

Standing at the brink of an abyss, the next step lies not forward but backward. Did Gandhi then want to put the hands of the clock back? No, he wanted to set them to another noonday.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

Meister Eckhart says, He who is everywhere at home is Godworthy; to him who is ever the same is God present and in him in whom creatures are stilled God bears his one-begotten San.

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[1] This word may be roughly translated as "sit in"