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# The Three Monkeys of Gandhi

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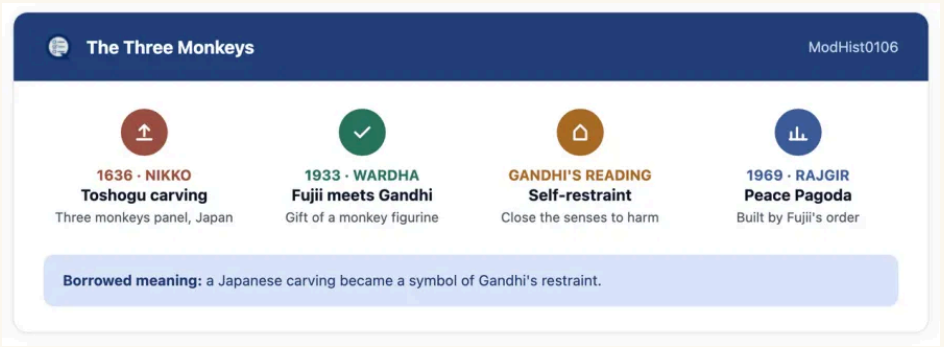
# The Three Monkeys of Gandhi

A small figurine of three monkeys is linked with Gandhi. Each monkey covers a different sense.

Gandhi did not invent the image. It comes from a 17th-century Japanese shrine carving. This lesson covers where the symbol began and how it became tied to Gandhi's philosophy.



The three monkeys, as displayed at Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad. Photo by Kalyan Shah, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.




A Japanese carving of 1636 became a symbol of Gandhi's idea of restraint.

**1636.** The Toshogu shrine at Nikko, Japan, carves its famous monkey panel.
**1933.** The monk Nichidatsu Fujii meets Gandhi at Wardha. By the usual account, he gives Gandhi a figurine.
**Mizaru.** The monkey that covers its eyes. See no evil.
**Kikazaru.** The monkey that covers its ears. Hear no evil.
**Iwazaru.** The monkey that covers its mouth. Speak no evil.
**Gandhi's reading.** A symbol of self-restraint and non-violence.

**Ahimsa:** non-violence in thought, word and deed.

**Satyagraha:** Gandhi's method of firm, non-violent insistence on truth.

**Toshogu shrine:** a famous shrine at Nikko in Japan, built in the 1600s.

## 1 What are the three monkeys called?

Each monkey has a Japanese name. Each covers one sense.

- **Mizaru** covers its eyes. The message is "see no evil".
- **Kikazaru** covers its ears. The message is "hear no evil".
- **Iwazaru** covers its mouth. The message is "speak no evil".
- The names come from a Japanese pun.
- The ending "-zaru" negates a verb. It also sounds like "saru", the Japanese word for monkey.
- So the phrase began as wordplay, not as a moral teaching.
- The ethical meaning was added afterwards, as the image spread.
- The monkeys are Japanese macaques, a common species in Japan.
- Outside Japan, the names are sometimes written wrongly, as Mizaru, Mikazaru and Mazaru.

## 2 Where did the image come from?

It came from a Japanese shrine, long before Gandhi was born.

- The Toshogu shrine at Nikko carved its famous monkey panel in **1636**.
- The panel is one of a set of eight monkey carvings on a stable wall.
- The original meaning was narrower than Gandhi's reading.
- It was mainly advice about raising a child well. It was not a general ethic for adults.
- Some scholars trace the idea further back.
- It may echo Buddhist teachings that reached Japan from China around the 8th century.
- Those teachings were themselves possibly rooted in older ideas from India.
- Exams use a trap here. Do not credit the three monkeys to ancient India or China. The carving Gandhi's story rests on is from 17th-century Nikko.
- In Japan, the maxim is understood in a Buddhist way, as avoiding evil thoughts and deeds.
- In the West, it is often read differently. People use it for turning a blind eye.

> **Quick check 1.** The Toshogu shrine at Nikko in Japan carved its monkey panel in 1636. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

## 3 How did Gandhi get his figurine?

A Japanese monk is credited with the gift.

- In **1933**, the Japanese monk **Nichidatsu Fujii** met Gandhi in Wardha.
- Fujii founded the Nipponzan-Myohoji Buddhist order.
- By the most widely repeated account, he gave Gandhi a small porcelain figurine of the three monkeys.
- No single museum record confirms this exact origin. Treat it as the usual account, not a settled fact.
- The figurine is associated with Gandhi's few personal belongings, such as his glasses and sandals.
- Accounts differ on where it is kept today. Some name Sabarmati Ashram. Others name Sevagram Ashram near Wardha.
- Fujii's order later built **Peace Pagodas** across India.
- One of them is at Rajgir in Bihar.

## 4 How did Gandhi read the symbol?

He read it as advice on self-control.

- Gandhi treated the figurine as a personal symbol of his own philosophy.
- He read it as practical moral advice.
- Closing off the senses to harmful input helps stop corrupting thoughts and actions at the start.
- The symbol links to **self-restraint and self-discipline**.
- These values were central to his idea of **satyagraha**.
- They also tie into **ahimsa**, or non-violence.
- Gandhi wove this one small symbol into a far larger moral philosophy built on truth and non-violence.
- For that wider framework, see Gandhi's Philosophy: From Hind Swaraj to Champaran.
- Hind Swaraj, his early treatise, appeared in 1909.
- Gandhi coined the word satyagraha in South Africa, years before he returned to India.
- Gandhi was assassinated on 30 January 1948 at Birla House in Delhi. Objects like this figurine became part of how people remember him.

## 5 What does the borrowing teach us?

Gandhi took a foreign image and gave it his own meaning.

- Gandhi chose a Japanese folk image, not an Indian one, as a personal symbol.
- That shows how freely his moral philosophy borrowed across cultures.
- He judged ideas on their content, not their origin.
- He often took an existing word or image and filled it with new meaning.

- He did this with **Sarvodaya**, a word he coined in 1908 as the title of his Gujarati version of Ruskin's *Unto This Last*.
- See Sarvodaya: Gandhi's Word for Universal Welfare.
- A small, humble object outlasting grand monuments says something about legacies.
- People remember an object or gesture more easily than an idea stated in words.
- Sabarmati Ashram is also where the Salt March began on 12 March 1930. See Civil Disobedience and the Salt March.
- For the state that hosts Sabarmati, see Gujarat State Profile.

> **Quick check 2.** Kikazaru is the monkey that covers its mouth. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

**Remember:** Mizaru eyes, Kikazaru ears, Iwazaru mouth. Nikko, Toshogu shrine, 1636. Fujii, 1933. Figurine, by the usual account. Gandhi's reading: self-restraint, ahimsa. Japanese origin, not Indian.

> **Think it through:** The carving was about raising a child well. How did Gandhi change its meaning?
>
> He widened it. He read it as a rule of self-restraint for everyone, tied to non-violence. The image stayed the same. Gandhi's meaning was new.

> **Quick check 3.** By the most widely repeated account, the monk Nichidatsu Fujii gave Gandhi the figurine in 1933. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

## Practice MCQs

**1. The three monkeys associated with Gandhi are named Mizaru, Kikazaru, and Iwazaru. What does Iwazaru represent?**

**A.** See no evil

**B.** Speak no evil

**C.** Do no evil

**D.** Hear no evil

See answer ↓

**2. In 1933, who gave Gandhi the porcelain figurine of the three monkeys?**

**A.** A group of Chinese diplomats

**B.** Rabindranath Tagore

**C.** The Japanese monk Nichidatsu Fujii

**D.** The British Viceroy

See answer ↓

**3. Consider these two statements about the three-monkeys carving at Japan's Toshogu shrine.**

**Statement 1: It was carved in 1636.**

**Statement 2: It is part of a set of eight monkey carvings on a stable wall.**

**Which statement(s) is/are correct?**

**A.** Only Statement 1 is correct

**B.** Only Statement 2 is correct

**C.** Neither statement is correct

**D.** Both statements are correct

See answer ↓

**4. In Gandhi's three-monkey figurine, which monkey covers its ears, representing "hear no evil"?**

**A.** Iwazaru

**B.** Mizaru

**C.** Kikazaru

**D.** Shizaru

See answer ↓

**5. Gandhi read the three-monkeys symbol as a discipline of self-restraint linked to non-violence.**

**Which modern use of the same symbol does this article describe as quite different from that reading?**

**A.** A diplomatic term for maintaining strict neutrality

**B.** A cynical shorthand for wilfully ignoring wrongdoing

**C.** A children's educational icon about good manners

**D.** An academic shorthand for careful historical research

See answer ↓

**6. Consider these two statements about Nichidatsu Fujii.**

**Statement 1: He gave Gandhi a three-monkeys figurine in 1933.**

**Statement 2: He began building Peace Pagodas worldwide in 1947, as a response to the atomic bombings.**

**Which statement(s) is/are correct?**

**A.** Only Statement 1 is correct

**B.** Only Statement 2 is correct

**C.** Neither statement is correct

**D.** Both statements are correct

See answer ↓

**7. Gandhi coined the term 'Sarvodaya' in 1908 as the title of his Gujarati translation of which work?**

**A.** Ruskin's 'Unto This Last'

**B.** Tolstoy's 'The Kingdom of God Is Within You'

**C.** Ruskin's 'The Stones of Venice'

**D.** Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience'

See answer ↓

**8. Gandhi's influential early political treatise 'Hind Swaraj', outlining his critique of Western industrial civilisation and his vision of self-rule, was written in which year, predating his permanent return to India?**

**A.** 1920, at the start of Non-Cooperation

**B.** 1909, while Gandhi was still in South Africa

**C.** 1930, during the Dandi March

**D.** 1917, during the Champaran Satyagraha

See answer ↓

# Answer Key

1. **B.** Iwazaru, covering his mouth, represents 'speak no evil.' ↑ Q1
2. **C.** Gandhi received the figurine in 1933 from the Japanese monk Nichidatsu Fujii, founder of the Nipponzan-Myohoji order. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** Both are correct. The panel was carved in 1636, as part of eight monkey carvings on the shrine's sacred stable. ↑ Q3
4. **C.** Kikazaru covers its ears, meaning "hear no evil." Mizaru covers its eyes ("see no evil") and Iwazaru covers its mouth ("speak no evil"); Shizaru is a later, fourth addition. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** Today the three monkeys are often used more cynically, as shorthand for wilful ignorance of wrongdoing — quite different from Gandhi's own reading of self-discipline and ahimsa. ↑ Q5
6. **D.** Both are correct. Fujii gave Gandhi the figurine in 1933, and began building Peace Pagodas worldwide in 1947. ↑ Q6
7. **A.** Gandhi titled his 1908 Gujarati translation of John Ruskin's 'Unto This Last' as Sarvodaya, meaning the welfare of all. ↑ Q7
8. **B.** Gandhi wrote Hind Swaraj in 1909, during a return voyage from London to South Africa, articulating his foundational critique of modern industrial civilisation and his conviction that genuine Indian self-rule required moral and spiritual transformation rather than merely replacing British rulers with Indian ones operating the same exploitative systems. The book, written originally in Gujarati as a dialogue between an Editor and a Reader, laid out philosophical foundations -- including his commitment to non-violence and scepticism toward industrialisation -- that would shape his entire subsequent activism after his 1915 permanent return to India. Hind Swaraj's early articulation of ideas Gandhi would spend the following decades putting into practice makes it one of the most historically significant texts for understanding the intellectual and philosophical foundations underlying his entire subsequent political career in India. ↑ Q8

## Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2

3. **True.** ↑3

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