

# LEO TOLSTOY

## A CALENDAR OF WISDOM

*Wise Thoughts for Every Day*





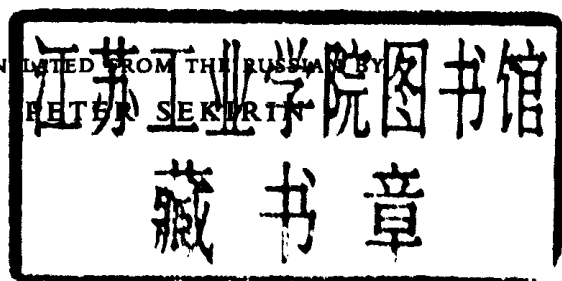
A CALENDAR OF  
WISDOM



*Wise Thoughts for Every Day*

COMPILED BY  
LEO TOLSTOY

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY  
PETER SEKRIN



Hodder & Stoughton  
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*This translation is dedicated to*

**MELISSA TEMERTY**

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PETER SEKIRIN  
Toronto, 1996



# Foreword



## Tolstoy and the Creation of *A Calendar of Wisdom*

by Peter Sekirin

This is Leo Tolstoy's last major work. The writer fulfilled in this book the dream which he had nourished for almost fifteen years of collecting the wisdom of the centuries in one book in the form of a calendar published for the mass market. He put a huge amount of effort into its creation, preparing three revised edition between 1904 and 1910. It was his own favourite everyday reading, a practical guide which he used regularly for the rest of his life.

The original idea for the work emerged in the mid 1880s. Tolstoy first expressed the concept of a 'Calendar of Wisdom' – 'A wise thought for every day of the year, from the greatest philosophers of all times and all peoples' – in 1884. He wrote in his diary on 15 March, 1884, 'I have to create a circle of reading for myself: Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Lao-tzu, Buddha, Pascal, the New Testament. It is a must for everyone.'

In 1885 he wrote in a letter to his assistant, Mr Chertkov, 'I know that it gives one great inner strength, calm and happiness to communicate with such great thinkers as Socrates, Epictetus, Arnold, Parker ... They tell us about the most important things for humanity, about the meaning of life and about virtue ... I would like to create a book ... which could tell people about life and about the Good Way of Life.'

The process of collecting these wise thoughts lasted for over fifteen years. The writing began in December 1902 – January 1903, when Tolstoy (then in his late seventies) fell seriously ill. He meditated about the meaning of life and death and decided to compile 'Thoughts of Wise People for Every Day'.

Originally the book was to be simply a collection of thoughts by different philosophers grouped according to topic, but in the course of his work Tolstoy changed the concept of the book. He started every day with a thought of his own, usually a philosophical or ethical reflection,



then illustrated it with the insights of various great minds and generally finished with some practical advice founded on his experience. Tolstoy wrote down about eight hundred of his own 'wise thoughts' for this book, grouped into larger topics according to the day, week and month.

Additionally, he decided to illustrate each week's thoughts with a story, tale or sketch. He selected fifty-two stories, about half of which he wrote himself especially for this work and the other half selected and adapted from his library (Victor Hugo, Balzac, Buddha, Dostoevsky, Leskov, etc.) After completing the collection of wise thoughts, it took him about another year to finalise his selection of 'Sunday Reading Stories'.

When he sent the book to his publisher, Tolstoy wrote in his diary: 'I felt that I have been elevated to great spiritual and moral heights by communication with the best and wisest people whose books I have read and whose thoughts I have selected for my "Circle of Reading".' He returned to meditate upon the book for many years, repeating often, 'What could be more precious than to communicate every day with the wisest men of the world?' He selected the contributors carefully; they represented a wide variety of philosophical views, ethnic backgrounds and historical periods: 'It will be a big surprise to the readers,' Tolstoy wrote, 'that together with Kant and other famous thinkers, they will find in my books thoughts by Lucy Mallory, an unknown journalist from the United States, from Oregon.'

The first edition appeared in 1904 under the title *Thoughts of Wise Men*. Between 1904 and 1910 it ran to three new editions, each of which was published under a different title: *A Calendar of Wisdom: A Circle of Reading Wise Thoughts for Every Day*, *The Way of Life*.

Between 1904 and 1907 Tolstoy worked on the enlarged and completely revised second edition, from which this, its first English translation, is drawn. In mid August 1905 he added the introduction (p. xi of this volume) and wrote in his diary: 'I have revised and enlarged my 'Calendar'; now it is twice as big. For two months I did not read anything else – neither newspapers nor magazines – and I felt so good ... I became more and more astonished by the ignorance, and especially by the cultural, moral ignorance of our society ... All our education should be directed towards accumulation of the cultural



## FOREWORD

heritage of our ancestors, the best thinkers of the world.' A year earlier, on 3 June 1904, he had written: 'I am busy with "The Circle of Reading"... I cannot do anything else ... I have selected thoughts and grouped them into the following major topics: God, Intellect, Law, Love, Divine Nature of Mankind, Faith, Temptations, Word, Self-sacrifice, Eternity, Good, Kindness, Unification of People (with God), Prayer, Freedom, Perfection, Work, etc.'

After its publication, the book was always present on Tolstoy's desk; it became his favourite book during the last five years of his life. On every day of the years 1905-10 he read the thoughts gathered for the day, and he recommended the practice to all his friends. On 16 May 1908, he wrote to Gusev: 'I cannot understand how some people can live without the Calendar. What could be more precious and important than communicating with the wisest people who ever lived on earth? ... I feel very happy every day because I read this book.'

Other editions appeared in Odessa and St Petersburg in 1911-12. The German critical edition (translated by E. Schmidt and A. Schkarvan, Dresden: Karl Reissner, 1907) included the sources of his numerous quotations.

Tolstoy prepared a third revised, shortened and simplified edition which appeared in print under the new title *The Way of Life* in 1910, the last year of his life. He wished to make the thoughts easily comprehensible for even the simplest and least educated people - farmers, peasants and children. He compared his two masterpieces, *A Calendar of Wisdom* and *War and Peace*, when he wrote, 'To create a book for the masses, for millions of people ... is incomparably more important and fruitful than to compose a novel of the kind that diverts members of the wealthy classes for a short time and then is forgotten for ever. The region of this art of the simplest, most widely accessible feelings is enormous, and it is as yet almost untouched.'

*A Calendar of Wisdom* was published in 1907, 1912 and 1993-5. It was not published between 1912 and 1995 because its religious and spiritual orientation did not accord with the official party line that existed in the Soviet Union. When it was published there again after the democratic reforms it enjoyed a tremendous success, with over 300,000 copies in print.



## A CALENDAR OF WISDOM

Astonishingly, it has never before been translated into English, and this translation of *A Calendar* will be a real discovery for the English-speaking reader. The book is the spiritual legacy of one of the world's greatest novelists and thinkers and is based on every major religion and philosophical system and on the works of some of the finest writers the world has ever seen. A classic work that will remain in print for a very long time, it belongs among the creations of human genius; it will serve its readers as a practical spiritual guide to how to be at peace with oneself and live a life filled with kindness, satisfaction and happiness. Tolstoy's original goal was the delivery of wisdom to the masses, 'to entertain millions of readers'. This aim remains as compelling now, at this time of increasing interest in spiritual awareness, as it was in Tolstoy's day.



# Introduction



*by Leo Tolstoy, 1908*

I took the thoughts gathered here from a very large number of works and collections of thoughts. They are identified by the names of their authors, though I have not marked the exact source, or book, or work from which I took them.

In some cases I have translated thoughts not directly from the originals, but from translations in other languages, and my translations are not identical to the originals. There is a second reason why some of these thoughts may not correspond to the originals: sometimes I have taken a thought from a lengthy and rather sophisticated piece of reasoning, and I have had to change words and phrases for clarity and consistency. On occasion I have even expressed the thought in my own words because the purpose of my book is not to give precise, word-for-word translations of the thoughts of other authors but, using the intellectual heritage bequeathed by great writers, to present for a wide reading audience an easily accessible, everyday circle of reading that will arouse their best thoughts and feelings.

I hope that readers of this book will enjoy the benign and elevating feelings which I experienced when I was working on its creation and which I experience again and again as I reread it every day in order to enlarge and improve the text.



# Contents



Translator's Acknowledgments	vi
Foreword:	vii
'Tolstoy and the Creation of <i>A Calendar of Wisdom</i> ' by Peter Sekirin	
Introduction	xi
by Leo Tolstoy	
A CALENDAR OF WISDOM	I
Biographical Notes	367



# 1 January

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It is better to know a few things which are good and necessary than many things which are useless and mediocre. — TOLSTOY

What a great treasure can be hidden in a small library! A company of the wisest and the most deserving people from all the civilised countries of the world, for thousands of years, can make the best results of their studies and their wisdom available to us. The thought which they might not even reveal to their best friends is written here in clear words for us, people from another century. Yes, we should be grateful for the best books, for the best spiritual achievements in our lives. — EMERSON

There are too many mediocre books which exist just to entertain the mind. Therefore you should read only those books which are without doubt accepted as good. — SENECA

Read the best books first, otherwise you will not have time to read them. — THOREAU

In literature as well as life, the same things are repeated again and again. Everywhere you go, you can see the unchangeable mud. There are so many bad books, such a great harvest of literary weeds which choke the good corn. Such books simply steal time from the reading audience — time, money and attention which should be directed only towards the best works. Bad books are a moral poison which dulls your intellect.

— SCHOPENHAUER

The difference between material poison and intellectual poison is that most material poison is disgusting to the taste, but intellectual poison, in the guise of cheap newspapers and bad books, seems attractive — and the more attractive it is, the more one's taste is spoiled. — TOLSTOY



## 2 January

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One of the worst prejudices is that of the majority of the so-called 'scholars of our time' who claim that people can live without faith.

— TOLSTOY

Through all the centuries, in every age, people have wanted to know, or at least to have a vague idea about, the source, the beginning and the final purpose of their existence. And religion has appeared to satisfy this requirement and to enlighten those connections which unite all people as brothers because they have the same origin, the same task for their lives and the same general goal.

— MAZZINI

The essence of every religion is to answer the question 'why do I live, and what is my attitude to the limitless world which surrounds me?' There is not a single religion, from the most sophisticated to the most primitive, which does not have as its basis the definition of this attitude of a person to the world.

— TOLSTOY

There is one general principle which has developed from the early period of the life of humanity to the present day. In the depth of all religions there flows the general, unifying truth. Let Persians bear their taovids, Jews wear their caps, Christians bear their cross, Muslims bear their sickle – moon, but we have to remember that all these are only outer signs and the general essence of all religions is to love your neighbour, and that this is requested by Manuf, Zaroastra, Buddha, Moses, Socrates, Jesus, St Paul, Mohammed.

— FLUGEL

The life of a person without faith is the life of an animal.

— TOLSTOY



# 3 January



Those who know the rules of true wisdom are lower than those who love them. Those who love them are lower than those who follow them.

— CHINESE PROVERB

The most important question of our time is whether we do the right thing during this short period of time which is called our life and whether it coincides with the divine will which sent us to this life. Do we do the right thing?

— TOLSTOY

When I am in difficult circumstances, I ask God to help me. But it is my duty to serve the Lord, and not His to serve me. As soon as I remember this, my burden becomes lighter.

— TOLSTOY

We have to fulfil honestly and irreproachably the work destined for us. And it does not matter whether we hope that we will be angels some time, or believe that we have originated from slugs.

— RUSKIN

Just imagine to yourself that the purpose of your life is your happiness only – and then life becomes a cruel and senseless thing. You have to embrace what the wisdom of humanity, your intellect and your heart all tell you – that the meaning of life is to serve the divine will which sent you into this world; then life will become a constant joy.

— TOLSTOY



# 4 January



Even if we do not want to, we can't help but sense our connections with the world of other people; we are connected by industry, by trade, by art, by knowledge and, most important, by the unity of our situation, the common attitude towards life. — TOLSTOY

Kind people help each other even without noticing, and evil people act against each other on purpose. — CHINESE PROVERB

Every person has his burden. One cannot live without the support of other people; therefore we have to support each other with consolation, advice and mutual warnings.

— *from* THE BOOK OF DIVINE THOUGHTS

All the children of Adam are members of the same body. When one member suffers, all the others suffer as well. If you are indifferent to the sufferings of others, you do not deserve to be called a man. — SAADI

The life of each person should be closely connected with the life of humanity because the whole of creation is filled with unity and consent, both in the outer nature and in the spiritual life. All manifestations of life are closely connected with each other. — MARCUS AURELIUS

All the history of mankind, since we have known it, is the movement of humanity to closer and closer unification. — TOLSTOY



## 5 January



There is obvious damage done by our words. For example a man may shout 'fire' in a crowded building and cause panic. But the damage is no less if we do not see those people who suffer from our words.

— TOLSTOY

A gunshot would may be cured, but the wound made by a tongue never heals.

— PERSIAN PROVERB

If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man ... the tongue is a small part of the body but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

— JAMES 3:2-5

When you hear people speak of the viciousness of others, do not share in the pleasure of discussing these matters. When you hear about the bad deeds of others, try to forget what you have heard. When you hear about people's virtues, remember them and tell others of them.

— EASTERN WISDOM

Listen to disputes, but do not be involved in them yourself.

— GOGOL

I said, 'I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin.'

— PSALM 39:1

Beware of destroying the unity of people by stirring up ill feelings among them with your words.

— TOLSTOY



## 6 January

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**Make an effort to do good things. It is even more important to make an effort to abstain from evil.**

— TOLSTOY

**Abstention should be a habit in your life; it should support you in your virtues. For there is nothing that cannot be overcome by him who is resolute in goodness.**

— LAO TZU

**Put at least half of your energy into making yourself free of empty wishes, and very soon you will receive much greater fulfilment and happiness.**

— *after* EPICTETUS

**God tests everyone, one with wealth, another with poverty. A rich man is tested in whether he will extend an arm of support to those who need it; a poor man in whether he will bear all his sufferings without discontent and with obedience.**

— THE TALMUD

**I will call the right groom he who can stop his rage, which goes as fast as the fastest chariot. Others have no power; they just hold the reins.**

— DHAMMAPADA

**No matter how many times you fail to achieve victory over your passions, do not give up. Every effort weakens the power of passion and makes it easier to gain victory over it.**

— TOLSTOY



# 7 January

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In relationships, kindness is essential. If you are not kind to people, you do not fulfil your major obligations to them. — TOLSTOY

You have to respect everyone, no matter how miserable or ridiculous he or she may be. You should remember that in every person lives the same spirit which lives in us. — SCHOPENHAUER

Do not be cruel to those who are tempted, but try to console them, just as you would like to be comforted.

— *from* THE BOOK OF DIVINE THOUGHTS

Five principles:

- Do not postpone until tomorrow what you can do today.
- Do not force other people to do things which you can do yourself.
- Pride costs more than all that is necessary for food, drink, shelter or dress.
- We suffer more from thinking about what might have happened than about what actually has happened.
- If you lose your temper, before you do or say anything count to ten. If you haven't calmed down, then count to a hundred. And if you still haven't calmed down, count to a thousand.

— *after* JEFFERSON

The kinder and more intelligent a person is, the more kindness he can find in other people. Kindness enriches our life; with kindness mysterious things become clear, difficult things become easy and dull things become cheerful. — TOLSTOY