

Absolute moral standards from an Eastern perspective

How do the absolute moral standards advocated by Initiatives of Change look from an Eastern perspective?

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I. Satyam - or Absolute Honesty

As children my siblings and I were often rebuked and told to speak *Satyam* or the Truth. Getting up to different childish pranks, *satyam* did not always provide a refuge from conflict, and telling lies and blaming others was the easiest way out. When we were caught out, we were exhorted to speak *satyam* or otherwise punished.

Satyam or honesty was often highlighted by my parents in my mother tongue, Malayalam. So as children we grew up knowing about *satyam*. As time went on and I finished school and left for further studies overseas I developed clever strategies to ensure that my parents did not know everything I was up to. So I invented stories to cover up my smoking habit and dressed up my accounts to cover questionable expenditure.

Like most of my peers, the level of my application of *satyam* thus became something that depended on circumstances. The ends often justified the level of application and I easily rationalised white lies as these did not seem to hurt anyone. Very soon *satyam* was something only to be exhorted as everyone seemed to claim that they were all honest.

Then at the age of twenty I met Moral Re-Armament now known as Initiatives of Change. Very soon I again came across this idea of *satyam* now expressed in English with 'Absolute Honesty' being amongst the moral standards outlined by IofC. I was impressed by the stories shared by several who had experimented with living by Absolute Honesty as a moral standard in their lives.

Hearing about people returning library books and stolen money, admitting to lies and getting straight about relationships, was inspiring and challenging. I decided to try for myself this experiment of introspection, listening in silence and clarifying in my life this norm of Absolute Honesty. Very soon ideas flowed into my mind of instances where I had not lived up to my highest understanding of *satyam*.

These revelations highlighted weaknesses that I was ashamed about, yet at also brought great personal relief. My next steps involved restitution with victims, honesty with my parents and a desire to live a new quality of life. This experience of *satyam* exposed my weaknesses to the light and this was part of the healing, growth and understanding that followed. For all of us, the courage to face up to ongoing challenges as one moves through life helps develop a sense of will and determination to stand by new found convictions. I soon realised that as we take responsibility for our ideals and principles we become empowered by them.

Eastern thought emphasises that the totality of every human experience is related through one's body, mind and intellect. Through my physical body I perceive the world of

matter and objects; through my mind I experience the world of emotions and feelings and through my intellect I comprehend my world of ideals and ideas.

Ideals and principles are part of the human intellect and a spur to action. When an ideal is broken, when the intellect compromises against its own convictions, a loss of will and moral convictions follow. Absolute Honesty or *satyam* thus is critical to the development of the human will and the notion of being courageous about one's convictions.

'What is right' is born from this deep intellectual base while 'who is right' is a construct of the emotions. Yes, we are human enough and our reactions are often so quick that emotions get the better of us. It is only after much considered thought that we are able to separate the ideals from the emotions and recognise that 'what is right' is qualitatively different.

This calls for the discipline of keeping one's head always above the storms of the heart. As the faculty of discrimination and judgement, the intellect needs to operate above the rising tides of emotional feelings. However, when we quickly give into emotions, feelings and impulses, these then dictate the nature of our reactions. Very soon we develop fuzzy and mushy thinking leading to a loss of clarity and discernment.

It is the privilege of humans to mould their destiny and to develop their ideals and principles. Having clarity about this cultivates the human will providing convictions and a sense purpose and meaning. At the intellectual level one must be ready to consider and reconsider one's position in the light of all available evidence and facts before being ready to take the necessary action, popular or otherwise.

Having accepted the ideal and principles involved, one will then have the courage and heroism to live by it. This is the essence of Absolute Honesty or *satyam*. A commitment to Absolute Honesty provides the strength and conviction which nourishes the development of the 'will' in human beings, a uniquely precious human condition. A desire to cultivate this sense of will and integrity requires constant vigilance and introspection with silence and meditation being key disciplines.

The lives of people with integrity reveal the development of a strong will to live up to their intellectual convictions and to act from this source of knowledge. Convictions act as the spring in the will of such individual and leadership is the outcome that spurs them to take great initiatives.

Absolute Honesty provides a key and a person of integrity develops an unseen power over life and its happenings. He or she stands out because they are no more fashioned by the notion 'that everyone does it so it is OK'. This is to accept 'relative honesty' acceptable as the lowest common denominator which is perhaps dishonesty expressed in fashionable terms.

2. Brahmacharya - absolute purity

Absolute Honesty or *Satyam* inspires and strengthens a positive sense of 'will' in an individual but is mere will power alone adequate? It is a paradox to equate willpower as existing within a dissipated body devoid of energy. One must also have the vitality within oneself and through the exercise of will and an intelligent application to a goal beyond self interest, creative results emerge.

Brahmacharya represents the Hindu equivalent for Absolute Purity. This discipline provides a broader insight into what purity is all about. This concept moves beyond the notion of controlling one's mind and passions to one of managing one's emotions and senses.

It is about all our five sense organs ranging from seeing, touching, smelling, hearing and tasting. When people have no realisation then the tentacles of these senses soon overpower them making them victims of the world outside, enslaved by its enticing reality.

This leads to a dissipation of energies and the vitality present in a person gets robbed. What remains is a mere physical body, existing with no personality within, to assert or plan or achieve anything in life. In this state a person's mind feels little, nor can his intellect think. He remains a drifting entity.

Lord Krishna, in the *Bhagavad Gita* Chapter 2 Verses 62&63, outlines how a lack of self-management of one's senses leads to disasters. 'From continuous thinking of objects, attachment to them is formed. From attachment arises longing and from longing, anger, from anger comes delusion, loss of memory. From loss of memory comes ruin of discrimination and from ruin of discrimination the person perishes.'

Conserving one's energies is critical, and developing an attitude of having an intelligent contact with the world outside from the level of the body is what *Brahmacharya* and Absolute Purity are all about. Even the Hindu concept of *Brahmacharya* is broadly interpreted ranging from extreme asceticism and control to one of intelligently creating boundaries and discovering a sense of balance.

Brahmacharya or Absolute Purity is all about the latter: developing a discipline that needs to be lived out at the level of the body – the physical level. It is a fact that the physical entity in all of us longs for contact with the world of objects to enjoy sense gratifications. Our eyes, tongue, ears, nose and touch help us to relate fully with the world as it is.

However, when individuals seek continuous gratification of sensual demands they develop a passion that breeds and grows in greater strength, ultimately leading to their enslavement. We just have to consider the plight of the alcoholic, the womaniser, the extremely obese, the gambler and the drug addict to affirm this reality.

Brahmacharya was prescribed as a discipline to be diligently lived at the physical level. It is about exerting self-management with regards to all of one's sense enjoyments. This does not at all mean their total self-denial. The world of objects is meant for us to enjoy and appreciate. The scriptures do not deny us this freedom.

However, what is stressed is the need for us to be masters of our enjoyment rather than become victims through being addicted. 'Enjoy the world but do not let the world enjoy you' goes the refrain. Very often Absolute Purity and *Brahmacharya* have been misunderstood in the context of complete abstinence from sexual life and the enjoyment of objects.

It is more about excessive indulgence with sensual pleasures as a whole and not one that is just limited only to issues of sex. This can even be about talking too much, listening to music all the time or eating all the time, thus exhibiting no sense of restraint. All the senses work together feeding one another. Together they become powerful and when they attack our imagination and we get enslaved a creative human condition within us becomes seriously weakened.

An un-intelligent and abrupt denial of sensual pleasures and control on the other hand through a strict interpretation of religious and spiritual practices bordering on asceticism results often in suppression. When this is done over a period of time it leads to bitterness, frustrations and cynicism.

The alternative is to continue indulging in sense pleasures and being overpowered by them. This results in a journey down the ladder of fall to the abyss of depravity and any attempt thereafter to live a spiritual life would be in vain. There is thus the need to find that inspired balance and liberation between these two extremes.

I remember my early attempts at living Absolute Purity and the challenge this posed as I had not differentiated the distinction between control and balance. I understand what suppression does as it only lends greater strength to the passion that one is attempting to control be it not eating meat, seeing films or reading books and magazines with the wrong motives or indulging in day dreaming.

Yet when I decided to review my spoken language to ensure that I dropped the use of foul words, avoided the books and magazines that I was tempted to read and enjoy, reviewed the management of my imagination and at the same time shifted my focus to a purpose beyond myself, the challenge became less daunting and life more enjoyable and purpose filled.

Reading Mahatma Gandhi's book *My Experiments with Truth* helped me develop strategies. I pledged myself to some 'vows' that helped me discern boundaries in my life with regards relationships, food, language and an

understanding of the 'cliff edges' that I needed to avoid. This was a good beginning and very soon I experienced a renewed sense of energy, vitality and dynamism. These experiments endowed me with meaningful personal experiences.

Absolute Purity is about freedom and liberation from habits, and the management of all sensual needs within boundaries that one clarifies for oneself. This is sustained by a moral and spiritual motivation that engages an involvement with a meaningful cause or initiative which helps sublimate these powerful forces within us and move them towards a greater purpose. It is neither about control and repression nor is it about licence and permissiveness.

As we retune the instruments of body, mind and intellect (*sarira*, *manas* and *buddhi*) we will begin to discern the melody that arises from the rhythm that is generated by a purposeful life that interacts positively with the world of reality.

The aim is not to annihilate individuality but to enhance performance, daring and achievement. Energies that are conserved coupled with a heightened memory and judgment are then able to provide creative options. The mind then operates within a fresh field of ennobling ideals and this redirects all its energies.

Brahmacharya like Absolute Purity is thus not a limiting concept but one that has wide implications beyond self-control and repression to one involving the management of one's sensual organs, recognising the balance needed, the boundaries involved and the liberation of one's energies towards meaningful goals.

In today's sensate and permissive environment where the challenges of choice are immense and the force of a culture based on a notion of freedom and licence so very powerful, we owe it both to ourselves and to the next generation to ensure that this gift of freedom and liberation remains a corner stone within our work and the source of its continued creativity.

3. Karma Yoga - absolute unselfishness

Through an understanding of Absolute Honesty or *Satyam* we have discerned how the intellect can strengthen our sense of will and resolve. Through Absolute Purity or *Brahmacharya* we have understood how the mind and senses could be managed to provide a sense of congruency, greater energy and vitality through one's body for undertaking inspired initiatives.

The *Gita* outlines various religious temperaments which are classified into the four well known paths (or 'yogas') to realize the Divine: *Karma yoga* the path of selfless action; *Bhakti yoga* the path of love and devotion; *Raja yoga* the path of mental concentration and *Jnana yoga* the path of rational inquiry. In the end all four paths converge and become one.

Anyone who does good works by helping others demonstrates that they cannot be confined within the limited circle of 'I, me and mine' and their body. Mother Theresa in our time exemplifies this spirit. Mankind stands in awe in the presence of such people who are ready to sacrifice for others beyond questions of creed or doctrine. 'Thy will be done' provides a focus that denies self in the interest of the 'other'.

In helping the world, we subtly also help ourselves. Work done selflessly for others purifies us and we forget ourselves - a great lesson all need to learn. There are no limits to getting out of selfishness. And true happiness lies beyond selfishness. That is why all the great systems of ethics preach absolute unselfishness as a goal. This is a most powerful and sensitive motivation that can be validated only by experience and not by mere words.

In the path of *Karma Yoga* the word *Karma* means work. No one can get anything unless he earns it; this is an eternal law. What we deserve and what we receive is determined by our work/actions or *Karma*. We are ultimately responsible for who we are and whatever we wish ourselves to be. We have the power within to create our own future, thus emphasising personal responsibility.

The *Gita* says that it is through doing work with cleverness and as a science, and by knowing how to work, that one obtains the best results.

Abiding by this eternal law is an act of faith. As we undertake unselfish actions - be it to help others in distress, participate in acts of charity, help individuals spiritually and do things with no sense of gain for oneself - the law works to favour us. One is reminded of the following refrain from the film, *The Sound of Music*

*Somewhere in my youth or childhood I must have done something good;
For nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever would,
So somewhere in my youth or childhood I must have done something good.*

All work aims to draw out the inherent power of the mind and to awaken the soul. This power is within everyone and so is the knowledge. The different works that we undertake provide opportunities to mine these qualities, to cause these inherent powers within us to awaken and for us to uncover them from within ourselves.

There can be no work without motive. Some are after fame, others money or power. Some work to leave a legacy, others for penance after wrongdoing. There are also those who work for work's sake knowing that good will come from their endeavours. This raises the question: if one works

without any selfish motives, what are the gains, if any?

Yes, he who works unselfishly gains the most. Unselfishness pays more. Nevertheless people do not have the patience to practice it. Love, honesty and unselfishness are great ideals manifesting power and possibilities. Anyone who can work even for short while without any selfish motives whatsoever has in them the capacity to become a moral giant.

A sense of self-restraint harbours latent powers. All outgoing energy arising from selfish motives is frittered away. But if restrained, this will contribute to strengthening resolve and will be reflected in the will and character of such individuals.

‘We have the right to work, but not to the fruits thereof.’ If you wish to help, never think of what the other's attitude is towards you. We will need to lift our thinking to this level of understanding. And work we must, says *Karma Yoga*. The householder must earn a living and the fruits, in the form of wages, will be there – but the important emphasis is that he works not with this in mind but gives his best and does his job guided by an unselfish spirit, neither counting time nor labour expended.

Undertaking an employment, as I do, in the spirit of a vocation removes a lot of stress. Further, involving oneself in additional activities in the spirit of giving engages one positively. While pleasure is ‘I, me and mine’ centred, unselfishness results in happiness as it is an ‘other’ centred activity. The capacity to handle frustrations and self-incrimination caused by unfavourable circumstances is often drowned by one's continuous involvement in unselfish actions.

There are many who are desperately focused in making a living barely making ends meet. Yet, with the right motivation, they can still share a spirit of happiness. Then

there are those who earn a lot and spend it in on themselves enjoying the luxuries of life focused wholly on themselves. The ‘I, me and mine’ syndrome blinds them until they face a crisis and awaken to ask serious questions. Then there are those who have found that sense of balance: meeting their own needs while contributing to others through sharing their knowledge, means and spirituality.

All this can be done by taking up works that come to us and incrementally responding unselfishly every day. The hope, ultimately, is that by constant endeavour we will grow and become increasingly unselfish. While we have to make a living we must also live a life that is meaningful - and selfless action contributes towards sustaining faith and commitment.

This will provide blessings in ways that we can only realise in the silence of our hearts where each one knows how grace has blessed and touched our lives. As the late Australian politician Dr Kim Beazley stressed, ‘Nothing to prove, nothing to justify and nothing to gain for oneself’, epitomises the qualities that must be inherent in the deeds performed.

Swami Vivekananda says, ‘He who gives man spiritual knowledge is the greatest benefactor of mankind because spirituality is the true basis of all our activities in life. Next comes intellectual help; the gift of knowledge for higher things and then that of giving food and clothes. The miseries of the world cannot be cured by physical help alone. Until man's nature is enlightened these physical needs will always arise and miseries will always be felt and no amount of physical help will cure these completely.’

Karma Yoga or Absolute Unselfishness thus inspires anyone to work for freedom through unselfishness by tuning his body, mind and intellect through initiatives that fully benefit others with no demands whatsoever. The unexpected fruits that one receives represent a growth in faith.

4. Ahimsa - Absolute Love

Ahimsa, or ‘non-injury’, has been the inspiration behind the non-violent movements that sprung up in India and was much in vogue during the Indian Independence struggle. Today it is in forefront of the anti-corruption call in India. One may feel happy about one's capacity for integrity – *Satyam*; develop a selfless capacity through *Karma Yoga*; strengthen a commitment to *Brahmacharya*, the spirit of balance in the practice of various forms of abstinence, and yet remain challenged by a lack of charity and at times an incapacity to overlook or forgive the shortcomings of others.

When I accepted as a twenty year-old to consider ‘Absolute Love’ as a moral standard for my life, I immediately realised the anger and resentment that lay

bottled up within me for a relative of mine. We had a disagreement but the language of chastisement that was used so angered me that I developed a deep hatred and resentment for him. I did all I could at every opportunity to show disrespect for him and spoke badly about him behind his back.

‘Absolute Love’ was far from my reality. I had enough reasons to justify my dislike and hatred for him and remained trapped in this cesspool. In retrospect I even enjoyed this cesspool as it obsessed my mind and gave me an irrational sense of power. I then met with a spiritual counsellor and reflected on this crisis. How should I respond because this is contrary to the standard I wanted to adopt as a guideline for my life. Accepting an absolute moral standard revealed my lack. He asked me how wrong I felt

this relative was in what he did to me. I replied 99%. I was then requested to seriously reflect on my 1% and to act there from.

This gave me much to struggle with and the rationality of the suggestion challenged me deeply. A focus on my wrongs revealed my shortcomings and showed how this cesspool of hatred was also affecting my relationship with others. So, after much reflection and a decision focused on taking responsibility, I wrote and apologised for my hatred and shortcomings with no justifications whatsoever. The resulting meeting with him some months later has remained a personal experience of the dynamics of love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

How do we tap into this resource of love and develop the capacity to forgive? Herein lies an important experience for anyone. I have since had to face other challenges less stark than my relationship with my relative. A commitment to *ahimsa* – this notion of non violence – has further provided me with a clearer sense of boundary, especially with regards relationships, be it in the home or at work or in the various undertakings that one is involved with on a daily basis.

It is critical to develop this spirit of forgiveness as well as to forget the follies of others whether dishonesty, jealousy or impropriety. How does *ahimsa* assist in such instances? Being a mental construct, a commitment to the creed of *ahimsa* clarifies boundaries. One is then able to deal with issues at hand by being silent, through reflection drawing on the lessons the incident has for me and then responding in a positive manner. A commitment to *ahimsa* narrows one's options and leads into the possibilities that enable anyone to tap on the powers of love inherent in all of us.

The emotion of Love represents a latent capacity within us and an understanding and application of 'Absolute Love' on the basis of *ahimsa* has, time and time again, inspired me to dig deep into this immense reservoir. Our capacity to draw on this requires of us to move away from the field of reaction and anger however justifiable this may seem. A commitment to *ahimsa* provides the searchlight through the narrow straight road along which lie opportunities to respond with love in seemingly difficult situations.

Eastern traditions – be they Hinduism, Jainism and

Buddhism – highlight this value yet very often the challenge of practicing this principle calls for a deeper level of commitment. It does not only mean non-killing or non-injury externally. This is also very much about the intention and attitude underlying one's actions. If a commitment to *ahimsa* becomes the basis of all relationships then there is the opportunity to appreciate the lessons that life offers us at all times, learn while maintaining a mental spirit of non-injury in all one's undertakings.

Ahimsa is a concept that nourishes both forgiveness and the need to be forgiven because it brings to light in the life of any introspective person emotions that could implode and trip any spiritual aspirant. A commitment to *ahimsa* is a prerequisite to a deeper understanding of non-violence, a virtue that those involved in reconciliation should cultivate and develop.

One of the most frequent failures in this area is the tendency to exhibit anger at improper moments. It is this realisation that highlights the constant work in developing awareness that is necessary to achieve this 'pearl' as an ingredient in one's character. A commitment to 'Absolute Love' guides the instrument of Intellect which then reflects on the instrument of the Mind the seat of emotions and the instrument of the Body which relates to objects and actions to ensure that the highest prevails in the external world.

These instruments, when acting under the guidance of an intellect committed to *ahimsa*, provide the capacity for drawing on the enormous potential for love lying latent within us. Present moment awareness provides freedom both from the past and the future and allows one to act correctly in the instance. It is a movement from the 'ego' to the 'Self' or 'Being' sensitised during moments of silence.

'The world is in me' and without me my world has no meaning. This provides a paradigm that communicates the need for me to express love and gratitude and add meaning to my circle of concern and involvement. First principles like *ahimsa* are critical enablers for anyone who wants to stand up for what is right yet have the spirit to accept any outcome and sustain the spirit of love in all of one's endeavours.