



“The truly non-violent action is not possible unless it springs from a heart belief that he whom you fear and regard as robber . . . and you are one.”

- M. K. Gandhi

Gandhi’s Path to Tolerance

There is a famous quotation attributed to Richard Baxter, the English Puritan, “In necessary things—unity; in doubtful things—liberty; in all things—charity.” This little rule says a lot, I’ve often thought. I don’t know if Gandhi ever read these words, but they seem to lend themselves neatly to a Gandhian outlook. If we wish to look at the statement in terms of tolerance, it is easiest to begin with charity. *In all things—charity.* There must be love, consideration, and respect for every other individual, whether we agree with them or not, whether we like them or not. It does not matter what their race, creed, gender, sexual orientation or ideology might be. Charity here is unconditional and unqualified. The New Testament gives the analogy of the sun—its light shines alike on all; so also one’s love must be perfect. This is most assuredly a difficult ideal. Some critics have said that this is unnatural and utopian. As such, they see no point in

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(805) 966-3961

striving toward it. Nevertheless, they, too, are entitled to the equal consideration of charity. Others, however, like Gandhi, Christ, Buddha, Ramakrishna, and many more, have said unconditional love is attainable through *training the mind*.

This takes some explaining. How come *the mind*? If charity is a matter of the heart, why don't we start there? Because mental distortion is what obscures and obstructs love's vision. A Tibetan text says, "The mind is the great slayer of the real; let the disciple slay the slayer." A disciple is one who undertakes mental *discipline*. This is not, of course, the sort of intellectual growth that might occur in a college course through acquired information and argument. It is as much a learning of what *not* to think, as what to think. Gandhi taught that the Law of Love was the essence of our being, and as such is irreducible and indestructible. It cannot be *developed*, but it may be uncovered and activated. This cannot happen while the mind is busy excluding, condemning and objectifying other human beings. Charity means, then, much more than simply a policy of affability. It means releasing a perception of the heart, that other human beings are much more than their opinions, their affiliations, their seeming defects or shortcomings. There is an inalienable dignity and value to each other person, the perception of which is not merely a logical proposition, but a felt and living fact. If we first *think* upon these lines, we will in time *feel* upon the same lines, by dwelling again and again upon the ideal. This is disinterested love, an open-ended support of another that has no personal agenda.

This brings us to the second statement: *In doubtful things—liberty*. Gandhi insisted that each human being is a truth-seeker, yet no one can claim to possess the absolute truth. There is relativity and limitation inherent to every standpoint, and no standpoint can offer anything but a perspective. Absolute truth, by definition, must be beyond perspective. This is a logically necessary fact that, once truly recognized, must result in a posture of humility, as one gives due measure for the unknown in others, as well as the short-sightedness in

oneself. The distinction between relative truth and absolute truth can become a kind of golden key to liberty. For Gandhi, every person has an inherent right and duty to seek the truth, which means to experiment with relative truth in daily life. Each of us must be faithful to the relative truth we have presently gleaned, all the while knowing that in time it will prove insufficient. Our formulations of truth will change as they are sifted; and may even require wholesale rejection at times. As we require liberty to experiment with truth ourselves, so we must grant liberty to others to fulfill their needs as truth-seekers.

But what if someone in practice deprives others of liberty? Are we to tolerate that? Perhaps they claim to be experimenting with relative truth as they know it. This brings us to the first statement: *In necessary things—unity*. Tolerance is *not* an ‘anything goes’ attitude. It is not the moral relativism articulated in some quarters of secular society. There are opinions and practices that must not be tolerated, because they harm or endanger others, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally. They violate the truths of dignity and liberty articulated above. Yet, how are we to express our *intolerance* for these violations of fundamental truths? This is precisely the point where Gandhian non-violence diverges from practices of violence. In a word, we are to express our intolerance tolerantly. We are to hate the sin, but not the sinner.

Gandhi was a master of the art of persuasion. He was an attorney early in life, and a careful structure of logical argument is evident in much of his writing. The large non-violent campaigns were essentially large-scale instruments of persuasion. He was attempting to change minds, and so change behavior. Of course, attempting to forge *unity in necessary things* by persuasion is, in itself, nothing significant. What *is* significant is Gandhi’s example of non-violence. If you terrorize a human being, you are likely to get him to change his behavior, and even, perhaps, to change his mind. This is, alas, too often how the world foolishly attempts to forge unity. A “shock and awe” bombing campaign is

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essentially a tool of persuasion. From a Gandhian perspective, it is entirely wrong-headed, and cannot in the long run result in anything good, though in the short run it may effectively bully and destroy dissidents. Gandhi's *satyagraha* is also a method of exerting force to affect a change of behavior, but that force, for Gandhi, is *soul-force*. The only lasting and effective change for a human being comes from within, that is, from voluntary assent. Satyagraha is a way of bringing another human being to a choice, forcing either an affirmation or rejection of some fundamental truth in stark terms. The self-suffering of the *satyagrahi* makes plain the issue at hand. It is a display of moral courage that makes an irresistible appeal to the conscience of another, and therefore does not persuade through degradation, as does violent coercion.

The problem of achieving *unity in necessary things* is frequently a disagreement about what constitutes *necessary things*. Everyone seems to agree that there must be no liberty regarding some fundamental truths or practices, otherwise the result will be chaos and disintegration. Yet while the refined intellect and heart of Gandhi pointed to abstract principles, lesser minds have insisted on their own particular race, religion or political affiliation. And as long as there is such a range of opinion—from grossly material to refined spiritual—regarding what is necessary to human life, there cannot be a truly non-violent cohesion to society. In other words, the unity we achieve will always involve some element of coercion, which necessarily sins against dignity and liberty. The Gandhian answer must be a patient, gradual awakening. Far from being a detached, aloof tolerance, the Gandhian ideal involves personal encounter and engagement. The conscience of humanity *can* be awakened, as heroic individuals take risks laying bare the choices for brethren who have not yet fully opened their eyes.

Joseph Miller, Member, Institute of World Culture

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