

Advaita Vedanta and Ethics

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In his analysis of the spiritual practice of Advaita Vedanta, Professor Basu discusses the four paths of yoga—karma-yoga (action), bhakti-yoga (devotion), raja-yoga (concentration) and jnana-yoga (knowledge of the divine). He shows how the four can be cultivated amidst ordinary life, and he shows further how their practice informed the successful strategy of nonviolence in the American Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Brahman alone is real, the universe is unreal and the individual soul is no other than the Universal Soul.

—Sri Sankaracharya, *Viveka-Chudamani* (Crest-Jewel of Discrimination)¹

I.

Ethics, to be useful, is deliberate, practical and purposeful. Let us begin with an ordinary example. For those readers who are gardeners, I ask you to remember looking at your garden at the end of the winter season and the beginning of the spring. In my own garden last summer, I remember admiring the suppleness of the red maple that we had transplanted, smelling the fragrance of gardenia blooms, watching the whirling hummingbirds as they drew nectar from the fuchsias, and picking the pomegranates for the neighbors. I thought of the noon rest after our lunch under the mock apple tree, watching butterflies resting on the hibiscus. The winter rains had washed everything away for a fresh start. Nature's decision to start anew is deliberate. It is the beginning of another season.

Now imagine the novice gardener working in the yard—clearing the underbrush, digging up the soil, and seeding new plants. There is joy in being in the open air and sun, yet the physical labor can be backbreaking. Most gardeners are self-taught. Most of us are fiddlers and practitioners, as if we carry a sketchbook in our minds, with a particular picture of the promise of this year's garden—its mix of plants, rocks and trees.

Over time and with toil, the previously rain-soaked backyard starts to take on a special significance. Slowly, its flora and fauna help us to forget our preoccupations of the day. Nature allows us to consciously settle on a permanent inner place, where beauty is not imaginary but all around us, in our bodies and minds. We now experience timeless things, in which silent beauty comes from the fullest glance at Truth (*Satya*), like a dewdrop on a budding green leaf. In this moment of solitude, we gardeners of truth enter into a realm beyond our worldly preoccupations. The backyard has been transformed into a boundless ray of beauty, the unbound Self.

The Advaita (nondual) Vedanta philosophy is the divine soil of truth—the soil in which many seeds find the One (*Ekam*). The gardener of truth can harvest the divine nature of unity by pursuing an ethical plan that is deliberative, practical, and purposeful. Our ordinary life in time and place is the starting point to gain the extraordinary Knowledge of the One. This choice is conscious. According to Professor Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan:

Man is responsible for his acts. . . . It is fundamentally the choice, which affirms the finite, independent self, its lordship and acquisitiveness, against universal will. . . . As a spiritual being he can burst the revolving circle of nature and become a citizen of another world in unity with Absolute Being who is his creative source. . . . His entire being should labor to become one with Divine. . . . The divine consciousness and will must become our consciousness and will.²

In this essay, I summarize the central tenets of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy. I will note that this system of thought is deliberate, practical and purposeful in that Vedanta draws from life's trials and experiences. Just as the backyard garden and the ordinary gardener can meld physical activity into mystical silence, so ordinary human beings, by toil and test, are capable of intuiting the deepest mysteries of our original Self. Humans become free of time and space if they choose to harness and unite body and mind (*yoga*). I outline four ethical ways that we can cultivate the garden of truth in the practice of four yogas: *karma-yoga*, *bhakti-yoga*, *raja-yoga* and *jnana-yoga*.

The practice of Vedanta also resolves conflict. In modern times, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) applied the principle of Vedanta as he put into practice the formal American creed of “One Out of Many” (*E Pluribus Unum*). I illustrate in this essay how Dr. King adopted the Vedanta system of thought as a means to end racial segregation. Principally, he advocated Oneness as a divine gift of *all* Americans, regardless of race, color or creed. His moral wick of justice (*dharma*) was lit in this lamp of Truth. I show how the Vedanta philosophy—which inspired M. K. Gandhi's

“Nonviolent Movement” (*Satyagraha*) to free India from England—practically resolved, as well as purposefully energized, King’s mission, his organization and his conduct of the Civil Rights Movement. I conclude that by anchoring the strategy for desegregation to the essential spiritual truth of freedom of all humankind, King and his followers struck a deep harmonious chord in men and women of all races and religions, both in America and abroad. Like Vedanta, his message of unity was commonly and universally realized.

II.

All religions and religious institutions must first answer the basic question that has puzzled most people for centuries: How can we be made truly free? We want the answer to this question to be easily grasped in simple and clear language. Dry intellectual theory will not do. As in a garden, the answer should be expressed in terms of common daily experiences that we can directly observe and verify.

The Sanskrit word “Vedanta” combines “*vid*,” “to know,” with “*antah*,” “end.” When combined, Vedanta means “the end of the Veda.” The word “end” implies both aim and resolve.³ According to Sri Sankaracharya (or Sankara, 686 C.E.) the perceived duality between body and mind can be assuaged by identifying with the eternal principle (*Vaidaka dharma*) of the Supreme Self (*Atmabodha*), which may be called Reality, Consciousness, Brahman or simply Truth. Preceptor (*Acharya*) Sankara reconstituted the classical view of the Upanishads regarding the uncreated nature of Truth. Following earlier (800 B.C.E.) Vedic *rishis* (sages), he ruminated on the human self’s inner capacity to attain absolute knowledge of the Supreme Self, a knowledge which is understandable in that our origin is “infinite and eternal, unchanging and indivisible,” yet as common as “the blade of grass” is to “the Personal God.” This Self creates, preserves, destroys and is “endowed with omniscience, lordship, great power and similar attributes.”⁴ The Vedanta thinkers assure the seeker that by pursuing a disciplined course of yogas, this knowledge can be experienced directly.

The Vedanta view, then, is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It is melioristic in its abiding belief that the world tends to become better and that humans have the power of aiding its betterment. It affirms that no powerful priest, king, elected leader or some other person of authority is endowed with a secret knowledge of human nature. Rather, each of us is divine and has the potential to perceive and know Truth.

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We can gain insights into the Infinite Self if we filter our relative existence and household habit (*samsara*), and distill, inspect and sort out carefully those lived extraneous and useless personal histories. Dispassion (*vairagya*), therefore, can be a functional mental tool. We are reminded in the Upanishads, in the supplementary text which follows Vedanta philosophical thought, that our enduring purpose is summed up in this question: “What is that by which, being known, everything else becomes known?”⁵ While this process of synthesis is inferred from endless life cycles, our choices should be timely and purposeful. Mainly by purifying human reasoning capacity, distilling and sorting, we can gain insights into our own existential truth. The truth about our origin will help us to cross the bridge to our spiritual home.

The dialectic between the spirit and matter is everlasting. This tension will never be resolved until humans choose a spiritual frame of life that will make them masters of their destiny. The human quest for true knowledge begins with daily actions (*karma*) that are tempered with one’s moral obligations (*dharma*). Within this duality, through the toils and trials of life, humans glimpse the integral harmony between “doing” and “being.” In this integral search for harmony between the limitations of karma and the steadfastness of dharma, an individual grows spiritually (*antar-yamin*).

Practically speaking, balancing the two is not an easy task, even for the gods. For instance, *Kena Upanishad* tells the story of God’s discomfort in finding out the truth about the inner Self, which sustains the gods of fire and air. Similarly, in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, the young man, Svetaketu, freely acknowledges that he has assiduously studied the Vedas but is missing the insight whereby what has not been heard of becomes heard of, what has not been thought of becomes thought of, what has not been understood becomes understood. Sage Narada reminds him that “although you have studied extensively, from the Vedas to snake-charming, you lack the knowledge of Self. Power is the source of Knowledge.”⁶

In Sanskrit, the word for “philosophy” is “*darsana*.” It is derived from the root “*dris*,” “to see.” According to Swami Nikhilananda,

*The purpose of [Vedanta] philosophy is to enable students to see Truth directly. . . . Philosophy is not mere intellectual pursuit or an abstract ideal, but the actual perception or realization . . . [that involves] direct experiences that destroy one’s doubts, and is followed by inner assurance.*⁷

The question is this: How do we construct an ethical plan that will direct us to the Garden of Truth?

III.

Since 3000 B.C.E., India has been experimenting with practical spirituality. The Vedanta view is that the self arises in social experiences. This perspective of one in many admits that spiritual discovery of self begins in the world, where it is simultaneously the experiment of search and the experimenter of truth. In this dialectical search, no intellectual preparation, special knowledge or claim to authority is needed. Our existence and experience are all that is required of us in this laboratory of life: the experimenter (gardener-subject) meets the experiment (garden-object).

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The truth of the Supreme Self is a common secret. Every person is the sole author of this rational inquiry. The method of inquiry is fourfold: the path of action (karma-yoga); the path of devotion (bhakti-yoga); the path of concentration (raja-yoga); and the path of supreme or true knowledge (jnana-yoga). These are ethical practices that unite the body with the spirit. Vedanta claims that through these practices, a skilled yogi, one who practices yoga, can find and expect to realize the Self.

Let us discuss each yoga ethic.⁸

Karma-Yoga

Human experiences grow out of interactions and relationships, which can be an important source of personal knowledge. Since by our nature and instinct we must act, the Vedanta thinkers set forth a pragmatic approach to gaining Supreme Knowledge. Each person is the object, the starting point. Karma-yoga refers to our actions, duties and obligations, which are set forth by human institutions—namely, family, work, religion, government and education. Some of these obligations are informal, whereas others, if violated, carry sanctions. By the fact of living in the world, our bodies and minds are both conveyers and receptors of knowledge. As each self engages with the external environment, it gathers materials that are internalized and stored as thoughts and concepts.

Experiences observed through interactions can be converted into internal value if we choose to train our bodies and minds. The yoga of karma (from the Sanskrit “*kri*,” “to do”) is the means by which secular ego-initiated physical labors and cognitive attitudes are serviced, processed and spiritualized into sacred knowledge. In this way, one stands to gain insights from ordinary activities into the permanent liberation (*mumukshutwam*). Learning how to find the eternal in the temporal is an ongoing human endeavor, in which calmness (*sama*), self-control (*dama*), self-settledness (*uparati*),

tolerance (*titiksha*), concentration (*samadhana*) and faith in oneself (*shraddha*) are the main attributes. With steadfast practice and service, karma-yoga can liberate (*mukti*) us from temporary acts of “doing,” as well as the “having” of material possessions, to the permanent state of “being.”

There is another critical emerging discovery to karma-yoga. It is a truth force. Since our concepts, languages and duties are framed in name (*nama*) and form (*rupa*)—nomenclature and structure—the moral position of Absolute Truth can be deliberately obfuscated in order to promote the selfish desires of a selected few. This yoga cautions us against the use of unjust means to reach desired spiritual goals. Immoral values that parade as fashionable social “good” will lead us nowhere and keep us ignorant (*avidya*). Today, this confusion over concept and practice is best exemplified in our planet’s steady ecological and environmental deterioration. Our heedless and stubborn refusal to take action to prevent global warming is an example of what Max Weber called “value-rational action,” which he defined as

a process [of rationalization] whereby thought and action [are] . . . grounded in the logical assessment of the most efficient ways to achieve a valued goal or end. . . . However, rationalization does not assume better understanding or greater knowledge.⁹

Drawing from Weber’s commentary on the social role of technology, Julien Freund noted that “the consumer buys any number of products in the grocery without knowing how they are made or what substances they are made [of].” Freund concluded that “by contrast, the ‘primitive’ man in the bush knows infinitely more about the conditions under which he lives, the tools he uses, and the food he consumes.”¹⁰

Karma-yoga is best practiced within the circle of interdependence between universal and individual, between center and periphery. The center balances the moral with each ring of activity as it reaches out to family affairs, workplace and so on until, as Stephen Spender said, “we break out of the chaos of darkness . . . into a lucid day.”¹¹ In this wheel of life, our choice is either to weave a complicated history, riding the merry-go-round for the rest of our lives and beyond, or else to break out of our selfish ego and unite inward with the center, the seed of dharma, illumined by the wheel of life and karma.

This kind of value-action plan, unlike Weber’s cautionary narrative logic of value-rational ideology, is grounded in existential truth. Individual choices have moral consequences for a just society. Karma-yoga calls for a sociology of duty that is anchored in “spiritual humanism,” which balances reason and faith. This perspective creates not only moral imper-

atives but also perceptions and attitudes. It implies squaring “all choices in men and action,” which Peter Burger called “institutionalized fictions [that see] through deceptions of social structure, through the web of bad faith and rationalization.”¹² Burger assures us that “there is a very great liberation in acquiring such perception.”¹³ Social institutions are not abstractions. Human conduct is fair when cultural mores and folkways value a commonality of spirit.

Bhakti-Yoga

Bhakti-yoga seeks the devotional unity of emotion and intuition. Emotion is a conscious affective experience (*bhava*), in which intuition meets creation. According to Professor Sudhir Kakar:

Psychologically speaking . . . , bhavas [are] more than psychic looseners that jar the soul out of the narcissistic sheath of normal, everyday self-limiting routine. They are experiences of extreme emotional states which have a quality of irradiation wherein time and space tend to disappear. . . . Bhava, then, is a way of experiencing which is done “with all one’s heart, all one’s soul, and all one’s might.” . . . [It] is creative experiencing, or rather the ground of all creativity—mystical, artistic, or scientific.¹⁴

In the Indian classics, a devotee (*bhakta*) may seek devotional unity in five ways. First is *istha-bhava*, the complete surrender to a god, saint or avatar. The devotee’s mental state is peaceful and calm in this state. Second is *dasya-bhava*. “Dasya” is Sanskrit for “servitude.” In the epic poem the *Ramayana*, this mental form refers to King Rama’s loyal caretaker, Monkey (Hanuman), who attains Heaven (*Sarga*) through his unflinching devotion to Rama.

Third is a mental frame of devotion called *sakhya-bhava*. It is social to the extent that a devotee can find peace and even truth through friendship. For example, in the Bhagavad-Gita, Arjuna’s worldly confusion was dispelled in the company of his friend Krishna, whom Arjuna subsequently discovered was none other than an avatar of Lord Vishnu.

Fourth is the parent-child emotional contact, which is called *vatsalya-bhava*. In this familial form, both the parent and the child can develop spiritually through each other’s mental nurturing, training, and companionship.

The fifth state or mood is called *madhura-bhava*. This is the ecstatic encounter of pure love between the beloved God and the devotee. In this state, bliss is supreme.

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Raja-Yoga

According to the Vedanta, both mind and body are reflections of Supreme Being (*Brahman*). The ego—the observer’s self in the individual body and mind—is said to be fickle, fluctuating between happiness and suffering. If we are to live a purposeful life, there is a moral necessity to integrate the physical system into a permanent and abiding Self. Toward this unity, Vedanta devotees routinely chant the Gayatri mantra from the Upanishads: “We meditate on the glory of that Being who has produced this universe; may He enlighten our minds.”

The internal is the starting point. According to the Vedanta principle, we are taught to construct the internal philosophy of being. Then we externalize the eternal self and mind to our behavioral-empirical self. According to Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, Self is conceived

*in the thinking self and not in the objects of thought. Self is not concerned with merely observing the workings of the mind in normal planes of consciousness, as is the case with the modern system called behaviorism, but points out how the mind ranges beyond the conscious plane of psychic activity, and how the resulting experience is even more real than experience of the objective world.*¹⁵

Raja-yoga outlines an eightfold practical scheme to purify the individual body and mind. It must be taught and supervised by a spiritual teacher. The scripture *Kurma-Purana* categorizes a step-by-step approach for training the individual to perceive the Self as either nonqualitative (*abhava*) or blissful God (*maha-yoga*). The first step is *yama*: nonviolence, truthfulness, not stealing, sexual restraint and not receiving any gift. The second step toward controlling mind, and thus developing ethical behavior, is *niyama*, which includes cleanliness, contentment, austerity, study (both formal and spiritual) and faith.

The third step is called *asana*, which is bodily posture. The Vedic sages confirmed today’s scientific truth that physical fitness and a healthy mind are intrinsically linked. We are what we eat and think. The fourth step is *pranayama*. The essential energy and force in one’s physical body (*prana*) can be disciplined (*ayama*) in three ways: filling, restraining and emptying. The fifth step is *pratyahara*, literally “gathering oneself in,” since the individual mind has a tendency to wander. This technique teaches a disciple to restrain and minimize external psychological impulses.

The sixth, seventh and eighth steps are synchronized. *Dharana*, the sixth step, is the practice whereby the mind is trained to affix for twelve

seconds to a certain point, which for novitiates is usually a part of the body. After repeated and disciplined practice, the disciple becomes a yogi, one who is able to hold back waves of psychosocial thoughts (*chitta*) in the whirlpool (*vritti*) of life.

In the final two steps—the seventh, *dhyana* (meditation), and the eighth, *samadhi* (enlightenment)—perceptual waves from mind recede. When one wave has receded for 144 seconds it is called *dhyana*. The final and decisive step comes when the mind merges with the body in *samadhi* for 1,728 (12 × 12 × 12) seconds.

Jnana-Yoga

Let us take a second look at that backyard garden we spoke of earlier. At the beginning of spring, we weeded, hoed and planted. Slowly, with mindful care, concentration and warmth, we transformed the garden into a field of beauty. In the springtime of freedom, and under our watchful eye, truth beckons us to the knowledge that at some moment the parts will form a whole. We have removed the obstacles that have prevented our seeing the perfection that was always present. In this experience, the garden (object), the gardening (process) and the gardener (subject) become one. The distinction between the apparent and the real is dissolved in the Supreme Knowledge (*jnana-yoga*).

Advaita Vedanta's distinction between the "real" and the "apparent" is essential for spiritual understanding. The belief here is that by knowing the temporal, humans can know the eternal. The Vedanta sages remembered the genesis of true knowledge, *jnana*, in this way: in the beginning, Cosmos, which is called Prana, the Universal Power, stood unmanifest and motionless. Motion arose in the cosmic ocean, and as Prana began to churn, vibrate and manifest, *jnana* gradually became differentiated into material parts. Cultures and languages, concepts, words and thoughts were constructed, all of which is termed *akasha*. Akasha, then, encompasses all material and sensory objects in our universe. Akasha, the apparent, complements Prana, the real; unmanifested Prana acting with manifested *akasha* balances the whole universe, which in turn produces thought and intellect.

In *jnana*, people can reach for the origin of knowledge, which in Vedanta philosophy is called *mahat* (mind). In *mahat*, thought and intellect can be intuited into a finer knowledge. Truth (*Satya*) is revealed. In this ethics of selfless service (*karma-yoga*), noble dedication (*bhakti-yoga*), and tempered

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concentration of mind (raja-yoga), the inner spirit of man and woman stands ready to behold the supreme ethics of consciousness (jnana-yoga). It is timeless, void and free of cause. In this practice of “moral humanism,” reason merges with emotion. This bond, in turn, teaches one not to view “reality” through a fictive web of bad faith and sensory cognition. This training keeps the individual close (*nivritti*) to the center, where all things begin.

Far from leading us away from social obligations of family and daily duties, this kind of moral attitude holds the potential for us to understand the true and real nature of things as they are, rather than what we would like them to be. We learn to resolve dialectics and contradictions. The possibility of harmony exists only because our essential nature is one. The neo-Vedantin Swami Vivekananda understood the highest state to be *sat-cit-ananda* (existence-knowledge-bliss absolute). Thus there is liberation in jnana-yoga, which is the yoga of supreme knowledge.

IV.

Advaita Vedanta acknowledges that humans are less than perfect because we particularize customs, laws and hierarchies in order to suit our distinctive physical ends. In this sense, evil is potent and insidious because its causes are often hidden and inadequately guarded by the so-called sociological codes and customs of the day. Nevertheless, in the enduring embrace of spirituality and humanity, every so often a Noble Ethicist (*satyapurusha*) is called upon to put into practice the principle of Vedanta—that is, the principle that moral good in human beings is universal, and that practical ethics in everyday interactions must be fashioned in the everlasting sanctuary of this truth of universality. The moral basis of justice (dharma) is social to the extent that it reinforces the truth of power. Dharma, accordingly, is divine law, which curbs our unwieldy desires and controls impulsive volitions. This “real” power is Truth (Satya), and evermore is the embodiment of justice. Acharya Sankaracharya observed: “*Jnayamanam anusthiyamanam ca tad dharma eva bhavati* (that which is known and that which is practiced are justice).”¹⁶

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a practitioner of the Vedanta system of thought. For him, the “immortality of the soul” was the “religion of reason.” Religion, he believed, “is not a deliberate invention, [but] rather . . . a spontaneous growth with its roots in the deep foundation of man’s nature.”¹⁷ King said:

Life is incomplete. Life is something of a great triangle. At one angle stands the individual person, at the other angle stand other persons, and at the top stands the Supreme Infinite Person, God. . . . No matter

how small one thinks his life's work is in terms of the norms of the world and the so-called big jobs, he must realize that it has cosmic significance if he is serving humanity and doing the will of God.¹⁸

Like Swami Vivekananda, King invoked the absolute power and moral capacity of an individual soul:

If it falls your lot to be a street-sweeper, sweep streets as Raphael painted pictures, sweep streets as Michelangelo carved marble, sweep streets as Beethoven composed music, sweep streets as Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven [will] pause and say, "Here lived a great street-sweeper who swept his job well."¹⁹

King was born in the racially divided city of Atlanta, Georgia. His ancestors, brought to America from Africa as slaves, were steeped in "social-gospel religious traditions." All his paternal kin—father, grandfather and great-grandfather—were Baptist preachers. At an early age, he noticed a substantial value paradox in Christianity. On the one hand, he watched his own extended family members, as well as other African-American families, reflect on the suffering of Christ and seek refuge in Christian otherworldly salvation. On the other hand, in daily practice, his white Christian neighbors barred him and his community from full political citizenship, as if religion within was different from religion without. Later, King recalled a childhood incident that exemplified this division within the Christian soul and institution. When he was a schoolboy, he learned that one of his white playmates would no longer be allowed to play with him because the boy would be attending a segregated Atlanta public school.²⁰

In *The Negro God*, Professor Benjamin E. Mays of Morehouse College in Atlanta, who was a mentor to Dr. King in his college days, challenged the established Christian orthodoxy of the racial majority that conveniently separated value from history. Professor Mays traveled to India, where he grew familiar with Gandhi's Satyagraha tenets. This visit and new knowledge affirmed and expanded his religious understanding, which was that religion "must give direction to life." After his return from India, Mays taught and wrote about a culturally enlarged ethics of spiritual engagement that must match and practice what it preached. That is, policies and laws must commit to equality and liberty for all citizens.²¹

One of Dr. King's theology professors, Dr. George D. Kelsey, who also taught at Morehouse College, surmised that the "Kingdom of God could never be realized fully within history." Prof. Kelsey found it difficult to reconcile the grand truth of spiritual equality promised to individuals by the Protestant Reformation with the homegrown segregation of the South.²²

During his senior year in college, King listed seven essential beliefs of religion. First, religious value is “permanent,” “friendly” and “universal.” Second, religion has an “objective” source of values, “a divine source and conserver of values.” Third, man’s nature is divine. Thus, all souls are divinely equal. Fourth, man has a purposeful existence. Devotion links the many parts to the whole. Fifth, religion allows one a “unique way of apprehending [the] experience” of the whole. Sixth, the “human soul is immortal.” Seventh, “There is evil as well as value. Good is a principle of totality, of coherence, of meaning; evil is a principle of fragmentariness, of incoherence, of mockery. . . . Hence there is no immanent logic in evil.”²³

In one of his many student essays, King discussed at length what he called “Religion’s Answer to the Problem of Evil.” He understood the love in Christ’s forgiveness as the ultimate redemptive tool of action. He reflected deeply on Christ’s message of forgiveness and love, understanding that “the ultimate solution [to eradicating evil] is not intellectual but spiritual.” He saw that

*after we have climbed to the top of the speculative ladder, we must leap out into the darkness of faith. . . . God is the creative power working through man. Existent empirical reality is not perfect. Evil is the degree of imperfectness of moral good. [The] moral freedom to do right comes from choice[s] that we make.*²⁴

In 1954, what this pilgrim of truth later called “strength to love” would be sorely tested in Montgomery, Alabama.²⁵ In his initial ministerial duty at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King transformed the American debate on race when he organized the now-famous boycott of the Birmingham public transportation system. His sermon entitled “The Birth of a Nation,” given during that time, was an important milestone in his struggle for freedom. Here, for the first time, his familiar oratorical style, derived from his ancestors and tempered by his mentors at Morehouse College and Crozier Theological Seminary, inspired people of all colors throughout the world. In the sermon, he acknowledged the dual nature of good and evil. He recalled his visit to Ghana, then newly independent under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah. When the flag of Ghana went up,” King said, “before I knew it, I started weeping. . . . I could hear that old Negro spiritual once more crying out, ‘Free at last, free at last, Great God almighty, I’m free at last!’”²⁶

King’s selfless love, action, and service succeeded in infusing the spiritual methodology of nonviolence into an organizational strategy. During one of his own visits to India, he embraced M. K. Gandhi as a spiritual leader and adopted the Vedanta ethics of Truth in nonviolence as a guide

for the day-to-day protest strategy of the Civil Rights Movement. King's Christian consciousness of selfless service (karma-yoga) matched Gandhi's nonviolent resistance. He wrote:

Then I was introduced to the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. As I read his works, I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. . . . As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence, is one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.²⁷

In India, King was awakened to Vedanta's universal moral message that change and continuity go hand in hand. Unlike the abolitionists of the nineteenth century, King understood that, short of a permanent change in American values, desegregation would never vanish. He also understood that this absolute change in all men and women, black and white, must aim for and reach people's sense of justice at the deepest level. He drew from the source of divine inspiration to appeal to our sense of fairness. In that spirit of one and many, all Americans were equal and free.

King's ethics of universality, while anchored in the American Constitution, also included all four of the yogas of Vedanta. He asked everyone to pray with Supreme Knowledge in mind (jnana-yoga). Whereas the Civil War had been fought with guns and cannon, King argued that moral battles must be initiated from within (raja-yoga). This kind of internal change of heart is permanent and can be advanced through prayerful devotion, mindful vigilance, and active reforming of the vital source and the sacred heritage of the divine spirit of humanity (bhakti-yoga). King reminded white Americans of the spiritual power of redemption in Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament. King assured Americans that God's love was infinite, omnipotent and complete. In a sermon given in 1967, a year before he was assassinated, King preached this gospel of selfless service to mankind and devotion to community (karma-yoga): "And so this morning I know that God is love, because Christ is love. . . . I know that God is just. And I know that God is a merciful God, full of grace and glory, because Jesus Christ is merciful."²⁸

V.

Our introductory analogy of the backyard garden serves to illustrate the ethical principle of the Vedanta system of philosophy. The variety of body and personality types should not fool us into thinking that differences

between people are permanent. The more we think about our differences, and act on them accordingly, the more miserable we get. We appear to be separate because we do not care to see that, behind our external social facts of life and our mental constructs, the internal nature of human beings is pure and permanent.

King preached and practiced the ethical beatitude of Oneness in four ways. First, he preached that genuine freedom arises in realizing that all souls are divine. Second, love of the divine is the wellspring of redemption. The individual is God's messenger of self-love. Third, in ego-less community service (karma), prayerful devotion (bhakti), restraint of mind and senses (raja), and unity of apparent and real knowledge (jnana), we have the capacity to unite body and mind (yoga) to behold the Ultimate Truth. Occasionally there appears a messenger of truth who can successfully challenge unethical human practice. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is my quintessential model for the Gardener of Truth. ❁

Notes

1. Sri Sankaracharya, *Viveka-Chudamani* (Crest-jewel of Discrimination), trans. Swami Madhavananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1998).
2. Robert A. McDermott, ed., *Radhakrishnan* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970), p. 161.
3. The quotations appear in a cogent summary on "Vedanta," offered by the Vedanta Society of Northern California Society, 2323 Vallejo Street, San Francisco, California 94123.
4. Swami Nikhilananda, *Self-Knowledge* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1946), p. 89.
5. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953). See especially "Taittiriya Upanishad," II. 8, pp. 550–2; and "Mundaka Upanishad," I, 1.3, pp. 671–72.
6. *Ibid*, p. 52.
7. Nikhilananda, pp. 15–16.
8. I refer the readers to the four lectures of Swami Vivekananda: "Karma-Yoga," "Bhakti-Yoga," "Raja-Yoga," and "Jnana-Yoga." All were reprinted and published by the Advaita Ashrama in Calcutta, India in 2000.
9. Cited in Joan Ferrante, *Sociology: The United States in Global Community* (California: Wordsworth/Thompson, 2000), pp. 14ff.
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16. See Radhakrishnan, p. 16.
17. Martin Luther King Jr., “The Nature of Religion in the Race,” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 375.
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19. *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.
20. *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, pp. 28–31.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 407–14.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 416ff.
25. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).
26. Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 72–89.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
28. *The Strength to Love*, p. 150.