

THE GOLDEN STAIRS: ETHICS IN THE ANCIENT WISDOM TRADITION

By John Algeo

THE ANCIENT WISDOM OR PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY as it has also been called, is a body of teachings that imply a way of behaving. Through the doctrine of karma, the tradition's emphasis on personal responsibility for one's decisions and actions creates an ethics that is individual, situational, and relative, rather than categorical and absolute. Thus it is futile to look for a "Ten Commandments" of the Ancient Wisdom—some list of specific things that one should or should not do.

To be sure, certain general principles of this philosophy, inherited from the Indic tradition, have been extremely influential in modern thought, principles like *ahimsa* (harmlessness) or *viveka* (discrimination) and *vairagya* (dispassion). Such concepts have developed a wealth of ethical associations around them. But more specific than these is a short statement published by H. P. Blavatsky, called "The Golden Stairs."

H. P. Blavatsky, through *The Secret Doctrine* and other works, was a leading proponent of the Perennial Philosophy in modern times. Thus her summary of ethics in "The Golden Stairs" presents briefly what the tradition has to say on the subject. Its thirteen phrases are the closest equivalent to a set of Ten Commandments of the Ancient Wisdom.

"The Golden Stairs" was originally published by H. P. Blavatsky in 1890, at a time when she was much concerned with injustice, loyalty, and altruism in her own life. Later a revised form of the document was made available. The differences in wording between the original and the revised versions are slight; they were made perhaps because in a few places the original version is susceptible to misinterpretation without commentary. The original version has, however, been printed in the *Collected Writings* (503) and is used here, as the one that most accurately represents the statement in the form Blavatsky wished to be known. (It was originally printed as a single paragraph; the spacing and numbers are introduced here to clarify the structure of the statement, which is discussed below.)

THE GOLDEN STAIRS

[preface] Behold the truth before you:

[1] a clean life, [2] an open mind, [3] a pure heart, [4] an eager intellect, [5] an unveiled spiritual perception,

[6] a brotherliness for one's co-disciple, [7] a readiness to give and receive advice and instruction, [8] a loyal sense of duty to the Teacher, [9] a willing

obedience to the behests of TRUTH, once we have placed our confidence in, and believe that Teacher to be in possession of it;

[10] a courageous endurance of personal injustice, [11] a brave declaration of principles, [12] a valiant defence of those who are unjustly attacked, [13] and a constant eye to the ideal of human progression and perfection which the secret science (*GuptaVidya*) depicts—

[conclusion] these are the golden stairs up the steps of which the learner may climb to the Temple of Divine Wisdom.

The statement consists of a prefatory injunction, thirteen noun phrases, and a concluding statement that serves as a coda to round off the whole. It is a deceptively simple statement, which many readers may be inclined to regard as a collection of pious banalities. But such a reading quite misses the point of this document, which is in fact a tightly structured guide to moral action.

Preface. “The Golden Stairs” is general advice that applies to a variety of situations, not a specific list of Thou-shalts and Thou-shalt-nots. It reflects a belief in natural ethics, rather than in revealed commandments. In its prefatory injunction, it stresses the naturalness and obviousness of moral action. The reader is told: “Behold the truth before you.” The ethical principles on which we should act are clear and available to everyone; they stare us in the face, and all we need do is be aware of them.

Indeed, given the reality of karma—the effects of our actions which determine our future—we have no alternative but to come to terms with the Moral Imperative of nature. Our only option is whether we shall come to terms with karma consciously, in full awareness of the meaning and effects of our actions, or whether we shall come to terms with karma unawares—whether, that is, we are to be the victors or the victims of our own actions.

In Jainism, one of the religions of India whose origin is approximately contemporary with that of Buddhism, the great saints are called *jinas*, ‘victors,’ from the root of the verb *jayati*, ‘he conquers.’ (The word *jain* means ‘pertaining to the victors’; and those who call themselves *Jains* are following in the footsteps of the victorious saints.) The Jina has conquered illusory action, false desires, and ignorance; he has beheld the truth before him. The Jina has already climbed the Golden Stairs and therefore is the Victor, the Conqueror.

The prefatory injunction is a statement about the naturalness of moral law and its public availability and is also a call for us to respond consciously to it. The moral truth of life is before us—it is up to us to behold it. The process of beholding consists of the thirteen steps that make up the Golden Stairs. Those steps form three groups, the first group with five steps, and the second and third groups with four steps each. The first

group of steps deals with the most general principles of ethical behavior; the remaining two groups become increasingly specific.

1. *Clean Life*. The very first of the steps is an inescapable preliminary: “a clean life.” In a sense, this step implies all the rest. If it were taken fully, it would be not the first but the final step. Cleanliness, says folk wisdom, is next to Godliness; and so it is—in a more profound sense than the folk saying is usually understood. A completely clean life is a completely moral one. So in our beginning is our end. But the Golden Stairs are not a scale to be run up once only.

All metaphors have their limits; and if we think of this set of ethical principles that we call “The Golden Stairs” too literally as steps that we climb, one at a time, to reach some pinnacle of moral perfection, we will have trespassed the limits of the metaphor. We do not climb the Golden Stairs once only, but many times, repeatedly; every action of ours is a step in some direction on these stairs. And so the first step is not taken once only, but over and over again. When we at last take the step of a clean life perfectly, we will have passed over all the other steps and arrived at the temple to which they lead.

Even though our first efforts at this step are imperfect, it is where we must begin. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine recalled that he had prayed to God: *Da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo* “Give me chastity and continence, but not just now.” That is the way most of us are with virtues we think will make life more difficult and less pleasant for us: we know we ought to have them, so we want them, but not just now. However, if we hope to follow the path, we must recognize that the spiritual life must first be a clean life.

A clean life includes speaking truthfully and kindly, acting fairly, earning a living honestly and usefully, thinking about others with good will, and being cheerful in the midst of problems. These are simple qualities, but the ethical life is basically simple and obvious. There is nothing secret or mysterious about it.

A clean life is one in which we are free of the stains that color our vision. One of the great works of Indian spirituality is the *Vivekachudamani* (*The Crest Jewel of Discrimination*) of Shankaracharya. It cites four preliminary qualifications for treading the path. One of the qualifications is dispassion or desirelessness (*vairagya*). The Sanskrit word, as is often the case in that language, reveals its meaning by its parts. The literal meaning of *vairagya* is ‘colorlessness.’

In our ordinary language we use colors to suggest mental and emotional states. We see red when we are angry, are blue when we are depressed, view the world through rose-colored glasses, are green with envy, are in a black mood, are in a brown funk, and so on. The emotional colors through which we look at the world distort our

view of reality. If we are to see the world and see it whole, we must take off our colored glasses; we must dispense with the moods that cloud our perception; we must practice vairagya; we must lead an uncolored, that is, a clean life.

This first phrase has another implication that is important to a theosophical view of life. To be clean is to be free of foreign accretions, of all the contaminants that cling to us and spoil our native purity. Goodness is not a foreign way of behaving that we must painfully learn. It is not like make-up that we must apply to cover over a flawed complexion. It is rather what is natural in us when we have washed away the accumulated dirt that hides it. All nature is fundamentally good—and human nature is so too. In *The Voice of the Silence* H. P. Blavatsky says that “mind is like a mirror; it gathers dust while it reflects” (paragraph 115). The task we have is to clean off the dust that covers the mirror, to let it reflect the sun perfectly.

2. *Open Mind*. If we are to find the way to cleansing our life, to removing the dust that has covered over the clear mirror of human nature, we must have “an open mind.” We should be willing to consider alternatives and not approach every subject, every problem in life, and every person we meet with the assumption that we already know how to deal with them. A closed mind is a conditioned mind; it has been shut off from the world of new experiences, and it reacts only to its memories. It is like one of Pavlov’s dogs.

The Russian Physiologist Ivan Petrovich Pavlov experimented with dogs by ringing a bell whenever he gave them food. Soon the dogs associated the ringing of the bell with the arrival of food, and automatic physiological processes, like salivation, would begin as soon as the dogs heard the bell, even though they were given no food. The dogs had been conditioned to behave in a potentially inappropriate way. And so it is with us. Our minds have been conditioned by our past experience, so that we cease to respond to new things, but react instead only to our own past.

When we are conditioned by our psychological past, we cannot lead a clean life, for that past is the dust polluting the bright mirror of the mind. So to lead a clean life we must have an open mind, a mind alive to new possibilities, an unconditioned mind. Being open-minded does not mean, however, that we have to accept everything that we encounter. Discrimination (*viveka*) is just as necessary as desirelessness. But we cannot discriminate truly unless we are willing to entertain new ideas, fresh alternatives, and are willing to conclude that our past ideas, even ones we have held very dear and close, are no longer appropriate. The past may be *passé*.

To have an open mind is to be aware of ourselves and everything around us without passing judgment on anything we find to be true, but simply recognizing what is. Long ago, European cartographers drew maps of the world that centered on the Mediterranean lands and showed Africa and Asia as small islands; they did not

show the Americas at all. Around the edges of the maps were written warnings: Here Dragons Dwell. As Alfred Korzybski, the founder of General Semantics, said, we often mistake the map for the territory. The map is in our minds; the territory is the world. To discover the world as it really is, explorers had to give up their old maps and venture into those territories where they had been warned that dragons dwell. But they found no dragons. They found new worlds instead. To make their discoveries, they needed to look at the territories around them and not at their maps. They needed open minds. And so do we.

3. *Pure Heart*. If we keep an open mind and consider new ideas, how do we keep those new ideas from becoming just more dust blocking the mirror? How do we find our way through a territory for which we have no map? How do we keep from making new maps that are just as wrong as the old ones, though in a different way? The next step on the Golden Stairs is the answer to such questions: “a pure heart.”

The expression “a pure heart” refers to something quite particular. *Pure* means ‘unmixed, uniform, homogeneous.’ “A pure heart” means the single-mindedness, the intensity of purpose, the complete devotion that is, according to the *Vivekachudamani*, the fourth of the preliminary qualifications for the path of enlightenment: *mumukshutva*, the will to freedom from illusion and union with the Truth.

When our heart is pure, we have nothing else in it except the awareness of the One Life that breathes through every being in the universe. When our heart is pure, we have only one desire, the desire to be consciously united with that One Life. When our heart is pure, we do everything for one purpose, to act out the will of that One Life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” It is only those with the single-mindedness of a pure heart who see that Principle of Life that dwells in us and without us.

In practical, everyday terms, “a pure heart” means knowing what is really important in life and not letting anything else distract you from paying attention to it. It is, in contemporary slang, having your head screwed on straight. Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden*: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.” Having a pure heart is hearing your own drummer and marching to his beat. “A pure heart” means freedom from uncertainty and indecision about what is ultimately good and useful. Those who have a pure heart do not wonder about where their lives are leading them; they know that there is only one direction to go.

4. *Eager Intellect*. To carry out the single-mindedness of purpose in a pure heart, one must also have “an eager intellect.” This is something quite different from an open mind. An open mind is one that is free from the conditioning of past experience. But if

a mind is completely open, if it is—so to speak—open at both ends, it can hold nothing; everything just flows through it. It is then not merely an open mind, but a vacant one. There is no virtue in vacuity.

Adam and Eve were not good when they were in Eden; they were ignorant. They had, according to the myth of Genesis, no knowledge of good and evil. It is only when we become aware of the great, flowing work around us and of ourselves as little whirls within the great ebb and flow of life, it is only then that we become capable of moral behavior, of good and evil, because it is only then that we can choose. Ethics implies making a choice; and choosing requires knowledge of the options. We human beings are ethical creatures because we have free will; and we have free will because we have minds with which we can know the alternatives before us. Etymologically, Man is the being with *manas*. That fact is crucial to ethics.

Christian scripture speaks of one sin that is beyond forgiveness, a sin against the Holy Ghost, but does not say exactly what that sin is. We might say that the unforgivable sin is the refusal to use our intellects. If we neglect our minds, we neglect the most human part of us; we deny our own humanity, we refuse the knowledge which alone makes moral choice possible. By a curious perversion of truth, we sometimes identify goodness with ignorance. But *ignorant goodness* is a contradiction in terms. Knowledge makes evil possible, to be sure; but it also makes goodness possible. Every virtue casts a vice as its shadow. In this world of duality, we cannot escape the complementarity of the opposites. To have up, we must have down; to have light, darkness; to have joy, sorrow; to have good, evil.

With an eager intellect, however, we not only recognize the existence of the opposites, including good and evil, we also have a basis for choosing between them. An eager intellect makes possible a discrimination between the real and the unreal. Thus, in the tradition of the Ancient Wisdom it is a basic premise that learning leads to goodness, that intellect is part of ethics. To be good, we must know.

5. *Unveiled Spiritual Perception*. Intellect alone, however eager, is not enough to guide us in ethics. Intellect is, as the logicians say, necessary but not sufficient. In addition to an active mind, we must also have “an unveiled spiritual perception” by which we can discriminate. That is, we must take the dust covers off our intuition. The intuition or *buddhi* is the faculty by which we see straight into the heart of things, by which we recognize the essence beneath the surface appearances and thus discriminate between the real and the unreal, the more important and the less important.

This perception is called spiritual because it is not limited to the senses—to what we can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. Nor is it limited to the mind—to what we can reason about, deduce, conclude inductively, or prove by theorems and logic. This

perception is not physical or intellectual—but is something that must be experienced to be understood.

Spiritual perception is not developed in the way that an oak tree can be grown from an acorn. It is not “my” faculty that I develop. It is not “mine” in any personal sense, but is already there, fully developed, available to be used by anyone who taps into it. It needs only to be unveiled, like a finished statue waiting to be shown to the spectators. The unveiling process is the practice of meditation.

Having used the eager intellect to its full, we then still the mind and thereby bring into the open the secret, but ever so powerful, insight into the nature of things that lies beneath the surface of our minds. The intellect is directed outward; the intuition inward. By the intellect we learn; by the intuition we recognize—that is, ‘know again,’ come into the old gnosis, arrive at the Ancient Wisdom. (Recognize comes from the roots of re- ‘again,’ co- ‘with,’ and gnoscere ‘know, have gnosis of.’)

In the first five steps of the Golden Stairs are the qualities that form the basis of all ethical action: right living, freedom from conditioning by our past, one-pointedness, mental awareness, and active intuition. The remaining eight steps concern the fruits of the first five, beginning with four that address the question of our relationship to our neighbors.

6. *Brotherliness*. First, what is it that we recognize through our unveiled spiritual perception? What is the essence of the Ancient Wisdom? Its fundamental teaching and the ground of the meditative experience is the Oneness of all life. Beneath the dualities of the mind there is a unity of intuition. Once we have perceived that Oneness in the universe, nothing can ever again be quite the same. There is a moral imperative that we should act upon our perception.

The action to which we are led is brotherliness. If all life is one, then all human beings are our brothers or even more than brothers, and we should treat them as such.

The wording of this step, as Blavatsky published it, was “a brotherliness for one’s co-disciple.” Perhaps because that wording seemed too restricted, as though it were limiting the practice of brotherhood to some select group, students of the same teacher, the revised version of “The Golden Stairs” changed it to “a brotherliness for all.” However, the two versions really say the same thing.

As has often been noted, the world in which we find ourselves is a vast school—a university that offers every conceivable subject and has all ranges of students, from beginning freshmen to postgraduate fellows. Within this universal school we are all fellow students, co-disciples. There is no human being who is not our co-disciple. And thus to be brotherly to co-disciples is to be brotherly to all.

Every human being is, quite literally, related to every other human being. If we could trace our family tree back far enough, we would find that the branches of our tree eventually intertwine with those of every other tree in the human race. All grow from the same stock. There are no human communities that have been completely isolated since the dawn of time; rather we are all interconnected by the interbreeding of our ancestors. We are joined together in a network of human brotherhood for which brotherliness is the only appropriate expression. We are all kin.

7. *Readiness to Give and Receive.* Of what does brotherliness consist? How do we show our brotherhood with all? When God spoke to Cain, he asked him, “Where is your brother Abel?” And Cain answered with a question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain intended the question to be rhetorical, to imply its own answer. It does. But the answer is not what Cain thought. We are each our brother’s keeper. Thus the seventh step is “a readiness to give and receive advice and instruction.” That is what brothers should do.

Giving advice and instruction is easy. It is not only easy, it is often a distinct pleasure. It makes the advisor and instructor seem important and knowledgeable. It builds the ego. Receiving advice and instruction is often a good bit harder, and more onerous. But what is important about advice and instruction is that it should be mutual. Every one of us can help someone else at some time, and every one of us needs help at other times. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Polonius told Laertes amid a long flow of other sententious recommendations, that he should neither a borrower nor a lender be. That may be good counsel when it comes to money, but in most other regards each of us needs to be both a giver and a receiver.

There is, however, another important detail about this step. We are not told to go about giving advice or asking to receive it. We are rather told to be *ready* to give and receive it. And that is rather different. Some persons give advice when it is not wanted or needed; and others seek for it when they should be developing their own resources instead of relying on others. We should be ready to give and ready to receive advice and instruction when it is appropriate to do so. And not otherwise. The difference between a busybody yenta and a good samaritan is that the samaritan pays attention to the word *ready*.

The ready giving and receiving of advice and instruction is the practical manifestation of brotherliness for all persons. To each person in the world, whatever our relationship to that person, we have a mutual obligation—an obligation to be supportive, to succor in adversity, to share in need, to rejoice in good fortune. This is the quality that the Romans called *pietas*—behaving toward others in a way appropriate to our various relationships with them.

8. *Loyal Sense of Duty*. One of the relationships we have is that with a person from whom we learn. And so the next step is “a loyal sense of duty to the Teacher.” The phrase is an important and realistic one, which can be understood in various ways, because the word *teacher*, like *co-disciple*, has more than one interpretation. We can consider several.

First, we indeed learn things from others, and by so doing we contract a duty to them. Confucius specified five basic human relationships that create mutual duties: parent and child, older sibling and younger sibling, husband and wife, ruler and subject, and teacher and student. In India, the relationship of the disciple to the guru is a sacred one, which involves “a loyal sense of duty.”

Even in the West today such a relationship is recognized. When a student in a university is studying for an advanced degree, especially the Ph.D., and is accepted by a major professor who agrees to direct the student’s work, a mutual obligation comes into existence; and long after having completed the degree and become an independent scholar, the student will continue to talk about “my major professor,” that is, “my guru.” Also persons who do not go on to advanced education often look back on some particular teacher, in high school or elementary school, as having exercised a great influence on their lives. And so loyalty to one’s teacher is a duty universally recognized, whether the teaching is secular or sacred.

Second, the teacher to whom we are to be loyal can be understood as being any other human being. The notion of teacher is correlative to that of student or disciple. Since the sixth step can be understood as implying that we are all co-disciples and since the seventh step has told us that we are to learn from and instruct one another, each of us is clearly the teacher of every other. As we are all co-disciples, so we are all co-teachers.

Brotherhood is a network relationship in which all participants are equal since all participate in the relationship on the same level (though not with the same degree of closeness to every other). The teacher-student relationship is hierarchical since teacher and student are on different levels with respect to the knowledge that joins them. A hierarchical relationship is not, however, an unchanging one. Whereas one day you are a student and learn from another about one subject, tomorrow you will be a teacher and instruct that same person about a different subject. We are all joined to one another by these two kinds of systems—the network of brotherhood and the hierarchy of duty—but both systems are fluid, and all of us fill a variety of roles in each.

Third, it is not irrelevant that Blavatsky capitalized *Teacher* in this step. The capitalization suggests that she thought of the teacher in this case as no human being, but as the Higher Self within each of us. *The Voice of the Silence* (paragraph 221) says:

“Of teachers there are many: the Master-Soul is one, Alaya, the universal Soul. Live in that Master as its ray in thee.” Finally, the teacher to whom we are loyal and dutiful is no earthly guru, no major professor, no leader of any organization, no master of any Brotherhood—but the One Life in us. The most any human teacher can do is to lead us to the Teacher within.

Polonius gave Laertes another bit of advice: “This above all, to thy own self be true.” If we change the wording slightly, the message is that of the eighth step: “This above all, to the One Self be true.” Our own selves are the One Self, and that is finally the only Teacher. To have a loyal sense of duty to the Teacher is to be true to our own inmost natures, the universal Soul.

9. *Willing Obedience.* When we have a loyal sense of duty to the Teacher, what do we do? What follows from a commitment to the teacher of Truth, whether the teacher is a mortal or is the universal Soul? The ninth step addresses that question: “a willing obedience to the behests of Truth, once we have placed our confidence in [it], and believe that Teacher to be in possession of it.”

Having found the Teacher within and having become convinced of the reality of the inner Truth so that we have faith or confidence in it, we must act upon it. Every idea has consequences for behavior. Once we have accepted the Truth of the One Life as an idea, we are faced with the behests, the commands to action, that follow from it. Ideas are the most powerful things in the world because they impel us to act.

Obedience to the behests of Truth is not externally required. Nobody stands over us and says, “You’ve got to obey!” This obedience is willing—it springs from within. It is the natural and inevitable result of recognizing the Truth. When a plant is exposed to sunlight, no one has to tell the plant to grow. Growth is the natural response of the plant to light. Our “willing obedience to the behests of Truth” is similar.

Steps six to nine of “The Golden Stairs” outline our relationship to other persons, in both the network of brotherhood and the hierarchy of duties, and they deal with the consequences of those relationships: our responsibilities, as brothers, to one another and, as students, to the moral imperatives that are implicit in the truth of Oneness. The last four steps treat more explicitly moral dilemmas and our responses to them.

10. *Courageous Endurance.* What are the behests of Truth? What are the practical implications for ethical behavior of the Truth of Oneness? Step ten gives one of them: “a courageous endurance of personal injustice.” Every person experiences during life situations that seem to be unjust, and indeed are so as far as the personality is concerned. Believing, however, that all life is one and that perfect order governs all things, we should endure such apparent injustice courageously.

This counsel is the same as that Christ gave to his followers when he talked to them on a mountain (Matthew 5.38-45):

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thy enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you, that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

The injunctions of the Sermon on the Mount are sometimes called “counsels of perfection” and are said to be directions for sainthood, not binding on ordinary persons in the world. But there is nothing impractical about them. On the contrary, they may be the most practical of advice. It has been remarked that if we all were to follow the strict justice of an eye for an eye, the result would be a world of the blind. From Thoreau to Gandhi to Martin Luther King, the doctrine of civil disobedience, of satyagraha, or passive resistance—the loving but firm refusal to participate in evil or to respond to evil with evil—has proven its value. We do not have to believe that the concept has always been applied perfectly to recognize that it works.

The impulse of our egos is to lash back at injustice, but it is more effective to endure evil courageously than to respond to it in like kind. As the Dhammapada says, “Hatred does not cease by hatred at any time: hatred ceases by love—this is an old rule.”

11. *Brave Declaration.* A passive response to evil and injustice may be mistaken for timidity or for acquiescence in the evil itself. To distinguish the courageous endurance from a cowardly one, the next step recommends “a brave declaration of principles.” We are to step out and be counted.

Some of us, to be sure, are only too willing to explain the grounds of our action, and we do so at every opportunity. A thin line divides “a brave declaration” from self-justification, self-righteous moralizing, and self-gratulation. Those who constantly declare their principles are not heroes, but bores.

However, there are occasions when we must make a statement. The ancient Christian martyrs who were cruelly tortured and killed as sport to amuse the crowds in the

arena at Rome went to their deaths singing psalms. Their response is known as “witnessing”; they were, by their response to their persecution, bearing witness to the Truth they had experienced.

Few of us today are called upon in a similar life-and-death situation to make a brave declaration of principles, but there are less dramatic contexts in which we should, while accepting injustice, state the grounds on which we stand. If the statement requires genuine bravery and if, in making it, we focus on principle, then it is likely to be well made. But if we get a personal thrill out of the limelight we get from making the statement or if we make it to justify ourselves, then it is probably better left unspoken.

12. *Valiant Defense.* However we regard evil and injustice as they affect ourselves, we should respond to evil and injustice afflicting others in a different manner. Christ advises us, if we are struck upon one side of the head, to turn the other side to our enemy rather than strike back. However, he does not suggest that, if a bully strikes the person sitting next to us, we should grab the poor unfortunate’s head and twist it around so that the bully can have a go at the other side too.

We are to endure evil that happens to us; we are not asked to endure the misfortunes of others. On the contrary, we are called to “a valiant defence of those who are unjustly attacked.” What we may not do for ourselves, we must do for others.

“The Golden Stairs” does not envision total passivism as an ethical ideal. In this, it is one with the Bhagavad Gita, in which Krishna urges Arjuna to fight for the rights of his brothers and against the deceit of his cousins. Arjuna is to enter upon a terribly destructive war, not for his own benefit, and not even really for the benefit of his brothers, but because evil has been done and must be righted.

Arjuna is told to fight without concern for the consequences—who will win and who will lose, who is to gain a kingdom and who is to be killed. He is to fight because the order of things has been disturbed and must be reestablished, and only through the battle at Kurukshetra can the balance be struck again.

We are finally responsible for one another. We are our brother’s keeper. We must do for one another what we may not do and cannot do for ourselves. That is the key to altruism.

13. *Constant Eye to the Ideal.* A gnawing question remains: just how far may we go in defending those who are unjustly attacked? What are the limits on moral action? Is lying ever justified, or killing? Simple moral codes say, “Thou shalt not bear false witness,” “Thou shalt not kill.” And simple moral codes are often useful, but they fail to apply to many of the situations in which we find ourselves. If a lie would have saved the life of a Jew hiding from the Gestapo, is lying wrong? If killing a terrorist

who threatens a plane full of people will save the passengers, is killing wrong? How are we to discriminate between an action that is necessary and one that is immoral?

The last step tells us where to look for the answer to such questions: “a constant eye to the ideal of human progression and perfection which the secret science (*Gupta-Vidya*) depicts.” All our actions should be carried out in view of the ideal of evolution. What contributes to human betterment is good; what does not is evil. That is the ultimate touchstone.

To be sure, we may sometimes be mistaken about what contributes to evolution—to be human is to make mistakes. However, as long as our intention is in line with that ideal, as long as our motive is to further the progress of humanity towards perfection, our action is a moral one.

If we worry so much about the results of our decisions—whether they will be right or wrong—that we become incapable of any free action, we have fallen into the Arjuna syndrome. We cannot sit on the floor of our chariot in despondency about the right course of action. As Krishna told Arjuna, the effects of the action are not our business. We are not to worry about them. We are to do what we believe to be right—what we see as contributing to human evolution. And there our responsibility ends.

One more point. The prefatory statement says that the truth is open to everyone; the last step says that the basis of ethical action is derived from the “secret science.” But these two statements are not contradictory. The science in question is secret, esoteric, or concealed, not because it has been copyrighted or trademarked, to be retailed by a mysterious lodge of adepts, but rather because it is of things that cannot, by their very nature, be told by mouth or heard by ear, but which must instead be experienced by each individual alone. It is open to everyone to have that experience, but until we do, the science that studies it must remain a secret to us.

Conclusion. And so we come to the end of “The Golden Stairs,” and only the conclusion remains: “—these are the golden stairs up the steps of which the learner may climb to the Temple of Divine Wisdom.” That is, Divine Wisdom can be approached only by those who lead an ethical life. But “The Golden Stairs” does not purport to be a list of commandments, telling the world what it should think about capital punishment, abortion, homosexuality, draft resistance, vivisection, or any of the other social issues of our time. It is the inescapable burden of each person to make a personal judgment on the hard moral issues before us. That is the consequence of individual freedom. And respect for the decisions that others make, even when we ourselves have arrived at different decisions, is the mark of true brotherhood. “The Golden Stairs” does not remove moral ambiguity from our lives or resolve the crises in conscience which we face from day to day. But it does point the way to our collective involvement in bettering society, in lifting a little of the heavy karma of the world.

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