

# ‘I had promised God...’: Chikuro Hiroike and the Practice of Vows

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truth

As he set about the task of founding Moralogy, Chikuro Hiroike was quite clear in his mind that his goal was to create a science, moral science, and not a religion. Yet even the most cursory study of his life cannot avoid concluding that the bedrock of his nature was a profound belief in God, nor that his decision in 1912 to give up a promising academic career and embark on the path that led to Moralogy was essentially religious in character. The account Hiroike provided in his *Memoirs* of his spiritual state as he stood at this crossroads of his life puts this beyond all doubt.

[December 1912] Suffering from such a serious illness, I will not live much longer. If God loans me one more year, however, I will write down the truth not heretofore available, based on the true precepts the various sages of the world wrote in regard to human salvation. If God loans me more time, I will dedicate all my academic achievements, honors and social status to God and make a living sacrifice of myself. I shall endeavour to bring salvation to the human mind for security and happiness of all humankind and the eternal peace of human society...

[1915] I had promised God earlier, however, when I had fallen very ill, that I would build a foundation for the salvation of humankind and eternal peace in the world. I cannot break my promise now...Hence, from a state of pennilessness I must estab-

lish a foundation for my great enterprise of human salvation and world peace (Anon., 2005, pp. 310, 321).

The religious context here was neither accidental nor superfluous; it indicated the fact that Hiroike was under no illusions about the magnitude, the difficulties and the cost of the task that he had chosen. Having worked for so many years and suffered material hardship to establish his reputation as a scholar, his own expectations of reaping the rewards of his efforts were matched only by the desires of those closest to him. Yet in disregard of all of this, he chose to cast away everything he had achieved and to start over again with nothing, taking a new road where the prospects of any success were very unclear and unpromising. He could not fail to be the aware of the many arguments in favor of abandoning this new course before he had properly begun, not the least of them being the welfare of his wife and family, who had already made so many sacrifices in support of his academic ambitions. And so he needed to fortify himself to set their material interests aside; this alone explains how ‘...when he was abruptly stricken with a serious illness in 1912, [he] had made a pledge to “leave my own children and adopt all humankind”...’ (Anon, 2005, p. 415). In the very difficult circumstances of the succeeding years, it was this promise to God, this vow, which ensured he did not deviate from the path he had chosen. Its importance did not fade with the passing years. Rather, it intensified as the creation of Moralogy turned into a lengthy personal trial; for his exploration of supreme morality, which lay at the heart of Moralogy, involved not just academic research, but a period of sustained seeking in the spirit. His new course was a quest for wisdom rather than simply knowledge, a matter of searching rather than researching; as he himself said of his *Treatise*, in it he was ‘expounding the results of the practical experience which

I have acquired during the past twenty years through labyrinthine struggles and after deep consideration and sincere efforts at practice...' (Hiroike, 2002, III, 507).

A large part of those 'struggles' were physical in nature. The creation of *Moralogy* was very taxing for Hiroike's already damaged constitution, and there were those who urged him to slow down his pace of work on the *Treatise* for the sake of his health. To one such who offered him advice on the matter in 1925 he replied,

You may think it is all right for me to rest, but I cannot deceive God. I must hold my brush until the moment I take my last breath...In 1912, I asked God to extend my life for one more year so that I could complete my life's work as a scholar by writing down the ways to help humankind for the world after my death. Soon after, I realized that I needed at least twenty years. Time flies, and now it is already 1925. I do not know if my frail body will endure until I finish my manuscripts...I must keep on writing no matter how much pain I feel (Anon., 2005, pp. 396, 387).

His 'promise to God' was not just a facet of Hiroike's physical and spiritual crisis of 1912-15, then; it became the guiding thread through a tortuous and lonely labyrinth that led to *Moralogy*. As he wrote in November 1928, just prior to the publication of the *Treatise*, at the time of his illness in 1912, 'I prayed to God to spare my life and pledged to endeavor in return for the salvation of mankind. From then on, therefore, I came to think of constant physical and circumstantial suffering as being just... (Anon, 2005, pp. 307-398).

His personal conditions aside, though, what prompted Hiroike into the taking of a vow? There were, of course, precedents without number in the major religious traditions of the world with which he was already familiar in 1912. His promise to 'bring salvation to the human mind' is perhaps closest to the Bodhisattva vows or precepts of Mahayana Buddhism, which are taken purely for the benefit of others.

Within the Zen tradition, the first of the Four Great Vows ('However innumerable beings are, I vow to save them') seems of particular relevance in this context (Suzuki, 1960, p. 14); it is probably more than a coincidence that the only decoration on the wall of his room at Hatake where he worked on the *Treatise* was a scroll with a phrase from the *Sutra of Avalokitesvara*, chosen most probably to remind him of the 'boundless benevolence of the Bodhisattva of mercy' (Anon., 2005, p. 385). But there were particular individuals for whom Hiroike felt a deep respect who might also have acted as exemplars. In his account of how Sontoku Ninomiya came to understand the importance of benevolence, for example, Hiroike noted the role of a vow in this crucial development.

Ninomiya went through great pains. He contemplated how to accomplish such a difficult undertaking and decided to fast at Narita Fudodo, in Shimousa, to solve the problem with help from Shinto and Buddhist deities. On the night before the fulfillment of his vow, Ninomiya received an important message in a dream (Anon., 2005, p. 325).

Beyond such individual and social influences, however, there was the current of the times; some of Hiroike's contemporaries who also took moral concern as the essence of their lives were similarly drawn to making promises to God in the face of the most difficult of trials. An examination of the lives of some of the other individuals who resorted to vows in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can serve to put the nature of Hiroike's action into sharper relief.

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Vows played a central role in the life of Mahatma Gandhi well before he stepped out onto the public stage in South Africa and his native India. Given his Hindu background, it is unsurprising that even in his early years he was preoccu-

pied with the practices of self-restraint found in both the Yamas of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and the Five Great Vows of Jainism. The strength of his family tradition in these matters was very evident when Gandhi expressed a wish to go to England to study once his schooling in India was complete. He could only overcome his mother's reluctance to let him go by taking a series of vows.

My mother, however, was still unwilling. She had begun making minute inquiries. Someone had told her that young men got lost in England. Someone else had said that they took to meat; and yet another that they could not live there without liquor. 'How about all this?' she asked me. I said: 'Will you not trust me? I shall not lie to you. I swear that I shall not touch any of those things...

'I can trust you,' she said. 'But how can I trust you in a distant land? I am dazed and know not what to do. I will ask Becharji Swami.'

Becharji Swami was originally a Modh Bania, but had now become a Jain monk...He came to my help, and said: 'I shall get the boy solemnly to take the three vows, and then he can be allowed to go.' He administered the oath and I vowed not to touch wine, woman and meat. This done, my mother gave her permission (Gandhi, 1927-1929, ch. XI).

Although these youthful promises were ones of renunciation, Gandhi learned much from them about the nature of taking vows that was to be important to him in his life on the national stage. As ever, the private and public spheres were indistinguishable with him, and the vows to abstain from temptation in England taught him significant lessons for later use, especially in the matter of consistency and self-honesty.

The taking of vows is part of Hindu practice, but it is also a universal form of personal discipline. It prepares one for adversity. So one takes a vow to give up something that is very precious. It also teaches one to value one's word, because once you have taken a vow, there is no one watching to see whether you observe it diligently or not except your own conscience

(Gandhi, 1999, p. 9).

This realization bore fruit as Gandhi matured. Perhaps the most important turning point in his life was the birth of the *satyagraha* movement in South Africa in 1906, a development which involved a radical extension of the use of a vow, turning it from a private act of renunciation to a public commitment to resist injustice and to work for the social good. When the draft Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance was published in the Transvaal in August 1906, Gandhi took a leading role in organizing the efforts of the Indian community to resist this attempt to discriminate against the non-white population of the region. A general meeting on the issue was arranged for 11 September, the most significant result of which was the passing of 'the famous Fourth Resolution by which the Indians solemnly determined not to submit to the Ordinance in the event of its becoming law in the teeth of their opposition and to suffer all the penalties attaching to such non-submission' (Gandhi, 1928, p. 68). This public vow was one which Gandhi was insistent should only be taken in the light of full knowledge of what it entailed, and much of the speech that he made on the occasion was given over to explaining the essential nature of such a commitment. He believed his previous struggles with the taking and observing of vows had qualified him for this task, 'possessing as I did much experience of solemn pledges, [and] having profited by them...' (Gandhi, 1928, p. 68), and he drew on his own past difficulties to emphasize that vows were not for the faint-hearted. In the present case, Indian resistance to the Ordinance could have serious, indeed life-threatening, consequences that had to be spelled out in advance.

Hoping for the best...a man who takes a pledge must be a robust optimist, [but] on the other hand he must be prepared for the worst. Therefore I want to give you an idea of the worst that

might happen to us in the present struggle...We may have to go to jail, where we may be insulted. We may have to go hungry and suffer extreme heat or cold. Hard labour may be imposed upon us. We may be flogged by rude warders. We may be fined heavily and our property may be attached and held up to auction if there are only a few resisters left. Opulent today we may be reduced to abject poverty tomorrow. We may be deported. Suffering from starvation and similar hardships in jail, some of us may fall ill and even die. In short, therefore, it is not at all impossible that we may have to endure every hardship that we can imagine, and wisdom lies in pledging ourselves on the understanding that we shall have to suffer all that and worse (Gandhi, 1928, p. 70).

It is clear from this what Gandhi meant by saying that a vow 'prepares one for adversity', for while he conceded that success might be achieved without the need for the kind of suffering he detailed, this was no guarantee of this at all given the hostility the Indian community faced in South Africa. His words also have a bearing on his claim that 'Vows can be taken only on points of universally recognized principles' (Gandhi, 1999, p. 148), for the content of a vow must be worthy of the suffering which taking it may cause; only then is the individual justified in proceeding with it. Vows are matters of the most profound seriousness, for their breach can destroy the integrity of those taking them, as Gandhi was at pains to warn his listeners in 1906.

To pledge ourselves or to take an oath in name of...God or with him as witness is not something to be trifled with. If having taken such an oath we violate our pledge we are guilty before God and man. Personally I hold that a man, who deliberately and intelligently takes a pledge and then breaks it, forfeits his manhood. And just as a copper coin treated with mercury not only becomes valueless when detected but also makes itself liable to punishment, in the same way a man who lightly pledges his word and then breaks it becomes a man of straw and fits himself for punishment here as well as here-after (Gandhi, 1928, p. 69).

Gandhi also went to great pains to stress that although in

this instance the vow was to be taken in public by large numbers, in essence it remained a matter purely for the individual, an act of self-responsibility.

...every one of us must think out for himself if he has the will and the ability to pledge himself. Resolutions of this nature cannot be passed by a majority vote. Only those who take a pledge can be bound by it. This pledge must not be taken with a view to produce an effect on outsiders...Every one must only search his own heart, and if the inner voice assures him that he has the requisite strength to carry him through, then only should he pledge himself and then only will his pledge bear fruit...I wish respectfully to suggest it to you that if you have not the will or the ability to stand firm even when you are perfectly isolated...you must not make yourselves parties to the resolution. Although we are going to take the pledge in a body, no one should imagine that default on the part of one or many can absolve the rest from their obligation. Every one should fully realize his responsibility, then only pledge himself independently of others and understand that he himself must be true to his pledge even unto death, no matter what others do (Gandhi, 1928, pp. 70-1).

This vow was the backbone of Gandhi's first essay in the practice of civil resistance which was to have far-reaching consequences for the history of South Africa, then for that of India (where the most memorable example was probably the Salt *satyagraha* of 1930) and later, via Martin Luther King, on the Civil Rights movement in the United States. This wide-ranging and powerful influence is testimony to the truth of Gandhi's contention in a letter to an unknown correspondent of 25 January, 1920, that 'Satyagraha is a weapon of the strong...' (Gandhi, 1999b, vol. 19, p. 350). Its strength derived, in turn, from the self-responsibility and self-reliance that Gandhi insisted had to be present in those taking that first vow of 1906; since it was to be carried out in the face of injustice and arbitrary power, there had to be full recognition of the potential suffering it could entail and both the willingness and the capacity to bear that suffering.

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Injustice and arbitrary power were also the leading features of the Bolshevik experiment that began in Russia in 1917. To stand, effectively alone, in opposition to that overwhelming and merciless power required such great strength of will that there were not very many in the 1920's and 1930's who could be found to hold their ground. One who did do so, though, was the great Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam, author of a poem critical of Stalin for which he paid with his life in a Vladivostock transit prison camp in 1938. Mandelstam was one of the first to come to a clear perception of the essential inhumanity of the emergent Stalinist regime, and to set his face resolutely against it. Such a course demanded, as Gandhi notes, 'the ability to stand firm even when you are perfectly isolated', and to prepare himself for this trial to come, Mandelstam had committed himself to vows while still comparatively young. He made no overt parade of them, but they were revealed, as his wife noted, in two poems he translated at the start of the Soviet era.

...in 1922...some translations of Old French epics were commissioned from him...the eleventh-century "Lament of St. Alexius" and "Aliscans"...Both are free translations, and M [andelstam] has brought out something in them that speaks of his own destiny; in the "Lament of St. Alexius" it is the vow of poverty, and in "Aliscans" he appears to be making a solemn oath never to hide in order to save his own life...the key to his behavior was to be found in his verse and prose...some things in his writings had the force of vows for him. Such was the vow of poverty in the "Lament of St. Alexius," the promise to continue the struggle, however dangerous and difficult, in "Aliscans," and the renunciation of Europe in the article about Chaadayev. This article was written in his early youth, but his view of the world had already formed, and he was true to the vows he took then until his death (Mandelstam, 1999, pp. 242, 254-255).

All of these vows were chosen deliberately and precisely to suit the circumstances that Mandelstam was to face. A vow of poverty removed any temptation to compromise with the regime to secure material reward; instead, Mandelstam and his wife chose to live a hand-to-mouth existence and were often reduced to relying on the generosity of friends once it became clear that none of his works would ever be published by the state. The oath never to hide was even more significant. Mandelstam neither retreated into silence or complicity as did so many other authors from the 1920s onwards, nor did he try to disappear into the vast spaces of the Soviet Union to avoid arrest and its consequences. Solzhenitsyn's account of the period makes very clear that this was a perfectly viable option; he recounts, for example, how Andrei Pavel, a Latvian from Orsha, reacted when the NKVD came to arrest him.

‘...he didn't open the door; he jumped out of the window, escaped, and shot straight to Siberia. And even though he lived under his own name, and it was clear from his documents that he came from Orsha, he was *never* arrested...Others, like Andrei Pavel...who were bold enough to escape immediately, before they could be questioned, were never caught and never charged; while those who stayed behind to await justice got a term in prison (Solzhenitsyn, 1974, pp. 11-12).

Mandelstam, by contrast, did not hide himself or his views; in fact, he did everything to keep himself in the eye of the regime. Nor would he contemplate renouncing a destiny which was bound indissolubly to that of Russia; like his fellow poets, Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak, he made no attempt to join the exodus from the Soviet Union in the early 1920s when a significant number of leading intellectuals availed themselves of the chance to go into exile in Europe. As with Gandhi, Mandelstam was prepared to pay whatever price was required in the observance of his vows, and this was

the source of the enormous inner strength which enabled him to stand out against one of the most brutal regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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Thomas Garrigue Masaryk was another important figure of the early part of that century for whom vows were an important element in moral life. It has been argued that the two maxims most closely associated with him, 'Nebát se a nekrást' ('not to fear and not to steal'), had the quality of life vows, and that the first of them was crucial to his success in creating and defending the state of Czechoslovakia (Luff, 2009, p. 90). Masaryk had to undergo exile and put his life at risk in pursuit of his goal, and he would not have reached it had it not be for the fearlessness embodied in his pledge. In 1915, for example, even reports that members of his family were in serious danger, in part as a result of his own political activities, did not deflect him from his course.

...my daughter, Alice, was imprisoned...I learned by hearsay that my wife had fallen ill, and I was afraid that Alice would not be able to stand imprisonment. The American papers reported that my son Jan, who was in the army, had been or was going to be hanged on account of me. All this and much else unnerved me, of course, but it did not break me...When my friends tried to comfort me, I put on a heroic front, as if it were nothing. It's par for the course, I would say (Capek, 1995, pp. 206-207).

As well as the need for vows in particular instances like these, Masaryk recognized a more general connection between such pledges and an insight into the nature of reality. As he put it late in life, 'A person can put up with a great deal, everything, in fact, if he has a goal and vows to follow it truthfully, come what may. Truthfulness is the secret of the world and of life; it is a sacrament religious and moral...' (Capek, 1995, p. 207). This recognition of the primacy of

truth and of the need to pursue it at all costs links Masaryk very closely with Gandhi, for whom *satya* (truth) was equivalent with the divine. For both men, then, a vow was something to be contemplated only in the presence of the ultimate reality, making it 'a sacrament religious and moral'.

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What light does all of this shed on Hiroike's own promise to God in 1912? The view that the taking of a vow was a relic of an antiquated religious past that was being swept away by the forces of secularism in private as well as public life became increasingly common as the 20<sup>th</sup> century advanced. Yet Gandhi, for example, argued that such a practice was timeless and inseparable from any genuine moral purpose, since it served to bring the individual into harmony with reality; as he wrote, 'Spiritual laws, like nature's laws, need no enacting; they are self-acting. But through ignorance or other causes man often neglects or disobeys them. It is then that vows are needed to steady his course' (Gandhi, 1999, p. 154).

But why would a simple promise to oneself or others not suffice? Why was there a need to invoke God in these situations? Gandhi's view was that since a vow was an indispensable form of self-discipline, a guard against natural human weakness, all of those taking one needed an example to fortify them when adversity struck.

God is the very image of the vow. God would cease to be God if he swerved from his own laws even by a hair's breadth. The sun is a great keeper of observances; hence the possibility of measuring time and publishing almanacs. All business depends upon men fulfilling their promises. Are such promises less necessary in character building or self-realization? We should therefore never doubt the necessity of vows for the purpose of self-purification and self-realization (Gandhi, 1999, p. 149).

In this context, it needs to be noted that the creation of Moralogy was the essential act of self-realization in Hiroike's life, and his vow of 1912 gains its essential significance from this. It should by no means be seen as a matter of special pleading, of bargaining with God for his life, offering a promise of service in exchange for a lengthened existence. On the contrary, it was a realization of the task that was to face him if he survived, a dawning awareness of the truth about the purpose of his own existence, and a profound longing to be allowed to carry out his mission. For these reasons it was an act of spiritual strength rather than weakness, a clear-sighted acknowledgement that his brush with death had taught him to recognize the limited and self-serving nature of his previous ambitions. His vow was a promise that there would be no relapse in this matter, that he would never return to the quest for academic honors. Once again, Gandhi delineates this aspect of a pledge very clearly.

Taking vows is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. To do at any cost something that one ought to do constitutes a vow. It becomes a bulwark of strength. A man who says that he will do something "as far as possible" betrays either his pride or his weakness. I have noticed in my own case, as well as in the case of others, that the limitation "as far as possible" provides a fatal loophole. To do something as far as possible is to succumb to the very first temptation. There is not sense in saying that we will observe the truth as far as possible (Gandhi, 1999, p. 149).

This explains why Hiroike appeared so inflexible to those closest to him after 1912; for him, there could now be no compromise in a matter of truth, no price that he was not prepared to pay. It is also the reason why he was able to take on all the burdens involved in his new task and see it through, despite family resistance and deteriorating health.

Even more broadly than this, though, it was the case that vows served to illuminate the path to danger in Hiroike's era.

The fact that his activities in creating and promoting Moralogy resulted in an increasingly precarious relationship with the forces of the state in the 1930s is another reminder that the price for choosing to engage in moral endeavor became increasingly high as the 20<sup>th</sup> century advanced. Ultimately, for example, Gandhi and Mandelstam were both to pay for their commitment to truth with their lives, a risk of which they were fully aware when they took the vows that were to chart their destiny. As the world darkened, though, such pledges alone gave those who took them the strength to endure. They were neither quaint, nor a luxury; a source of protection as well as peril.

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