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Title: “*Wisdom Used Compassionately To Build Character Brick By Brick*”

Western View on Philosophy and Wisdom:

In the West, philosophers regard philosophy as the “love of wisdom.” They have assigned two major meanings to the word *wisdom*--one is theoretical whereas the other is practical.

Wisdom as “theoretical general knowledge” means “obtaining a bird’s eye view of the universe by discovering the unity that underlies the diversity of things.” What is sought is the connecting link in the multiplicity of entities that inhabit the universe. This insight may be regarded as a vision of *reality-as-it-is-in-it-self* and by implication seeing the nature of *human reality-as-it-is-in-it-self*.

Once such a vision of unity is attained, one is said to know the nature of reality and that of human being.

The second meaning of wisdom points to putting this insight into practice i.e. to living a good life here and now” or answering the question: “what is the nature of a good life for a human being?”

Philosophers in the West from Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to Heidegger, Sartre and Camus, have given various answers to the above question. Their answers range from “ a

certain harmony in the three parts of the soul” to “ the building of character by forming good habits of the body, heart and mind” to “the living of an authentic life through the assertion of radical freedom by creating works of art” and to “insistence on engaged freedom consisting of living a life dedicated to revolt, freedom, and passion.”

In the West, Socrates understood *wisdom* as “living your philosophy,” which translates into “walk your talk.” Because Socrates adopted this motto, he had to pay dearly with his life. From Plato onwards, the death of Socrates became a reminder or better yet, a warning for others that by “making philosophy as a way of life” or by “practicing one’s wisdom,” one might be playing a fatal game. Thus, from Plato down to the 20th century, philosophers, being scared of losing their lives, kept the discipline of philosophy at the theoretical level only. They only talked about philosophy but refused to “walk their talk.” They engaged in the theoretical discussion but were not engaged “in living their own wisdom.” This is clearly evident from their endless discussions about *being*, *knowing* and *doing* and their outright refusal to translate their understanding of being and knowing through the vehicle of doing.

In the Western tradition, Socrates stands out as the only genuine philosopher who “walked his talk” i.e. who made “philosophy his way of life.” For twenty-three centuries, no other philosopher dared to stick his neck out to reveal himself as a practicing philosopher of wisdom. It is only recently that during the 20th century, we see the likes of Sartre and Camus, who following the footsteps of Socrates, ventured to put their

philosophies to practice. These two thinkers viewed philosophy as “being engaged in life.” For them, writing became engaged freedom—a commitment to a cause---taking concrete steps to change the course of reality as well as of oneself.

The Western tradition starting with Socrates reveals a shift from being “a philosopher” to becoming “a professor of philosophy.” The distinction between “a philosopher” and “a professor of philosophy” happened immediately after the death of Socrates. Socrates was a genuine *philosopher* whereas Plato introduced the tradition of *professor of philosophy*. Plato, as a student of Socrates, was a good note-taker, who compiled excellent dialogues as a tribute to his mentor and presented these notes or Socratic documents to his own students. He became the first *professor of philosophy* who taught his mentor’s thoughts to his students at the first University in the West i.e. his new Academy. While he was interpreting and commenting on these dialogues of Socrates, he was not acting as a philosopher but only as *professor of philosophy* i.e. teaching his master’s ideas. Aristotle who followed Plato’s example by becoming a *professor of philosophy* set up a model for others to follow throughout the history of Western Philosophy.

The real break happened after the death of the first real philosopher (Socrates), the one who was wise and lived his life according to the dictates of this wisdom. The tradition of *professor of philosophy* i.e. being theoretical—talking about wisdom, was due to Plato’s doing and is still carried on by teachers of philosophy. A genuine philosopher does not just talk but “walks his talk,” whereas a *professor of philosophy* only talks but does not “walk his talk.”

Western and Indian Views on Wisdom:

In India, however, philosophy is understood as *darshan*. It is a direct vision of reality in which a human being fits into the complex puzzle of the universe as a cell fits into the organic make up of the entire body. The cell is as significant as the universe because it is a part of the foundation of the edifice of reality.

This vision must become one's way of life or the art of living, which is called *sadhana* i.e. "wisdom used compassionately to help uplift humanity and oneself."

In the Western tradition, philosophy is the "love of wisdom." The seeker of wisdom discovers it as the unity that underlies the diversity of phenomena. The vision may or may not be adopted as a way of life.

However, in the Indian tradition, a philosopher is called a *Guru*. One who is a realized being and has gained wisdom through the vision of reality.

The *Guru* must fulfill three conditions:

- a. One who is a realized being and had this vision.
- b. One who is a mentor and lives this vision as his daily life.
- c. One who is a teacher and imparts this wisdom to others impartially and without any selfish gain.

In contrast to the Indian view of a *Guru*, the teacher/professor of the West, need not be a self-realized being or who has not had a vision of reality or one who has had a vision but

need not put it into practice in one's daily life. The only requirement of becoming a teacher/professor is that one has passed certain tests where one has shown skills of being an interpreter of a tradition. Therefore, a teacher/professor need not be a self-realized being or a mentor, only a skillful interpreter of other's ideas. Therefore, a teacher is merely a *professor of philosophy* and need not be a philosopher. He is expected to talk but is not required to "walk his talk."

However, in the Indian tradition, the goal of philosophy is to seek wisdom regarding *Sat (Being)*, *Chit (Knowledge)*, and *Ananda (Value)*. Since *satchitananda* constitutes the essence of the inner self of a human being, the entire pursuit of philosophy, in actuality, is obtaining complete knowledge of oneself. Since ontology studies being, epistemology investigates knowledge and axiology examines value, the entire enterprise of philosophy is directed towards grasping the inner nature of a human being, which is called *Atman*. Of all the Western philosophers, Socrates was the only one who grasped it clearly and presented this wisdom through his two maxims: "Know thyself" and "An Unexamined Life is not Worth Living." Furthermore, he lived his life according to these two maxims and died for upholding them. However, others who followed Socrates forgot his genuine philosophical quest by turning philosophy into a theoretical study of being, knowledge and value.

Let's look at the word *philosophy*. In the Western tradition, the word *philosophy* is broken up into two words: *philia* meaning love and *sophia* meaning wisdom. A philosopher is a seeker of wisdom who when finds it conveys it to others through

discussion and analysis. Whereas in India, the word *philosophy* is understood by reversing the order of the two words *philia* and *sophia*. In place of the “love of wisdom,” philosophy is grasped as “wisdom used lovingly and compassionately to help uplift humanity and oneself.” Philosophy so understood is not just a theoretical talk about abstract and laudable concepts but wisdom adopted in the living of life here and now. This wisdom, which ought to be used to serve humanity, was presented in the Indian tradition in books of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Yogasutras and is best exemplified in the lives of the Buddha, Vivekananda, and Gandhi.

My Adoption of the Indian View of Wisdom:

To me, philosophy means, “wisdom used compassionately” to serve humanity. This notion was presented in the *Bhagavad-Gita* by Krishna as *Nishkam Karma*, meaning “performing action passionately in the service of others without hankering after the reward.” In the 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi adopted this doctrine by converting it into a social tool for uplifting the standard of life of the impoverished people of India as well as used it as a political instrument to fight the unjust British rule in India.

For Gandhi, *Nishkam Karma* meant “serving everybody;” “feeding everyone;” and “educating every individual.” Like Gandhi, Vivekananda, who represents the quintessence of the Indian philosophical tradition, used to say that if you cannot find god in a living human child, then it is futile to be searching it in the stone idol in a temple. To experience god or spirituality, one must serve selflessly the downtrodden members of humanity.

With the entire tradition of Indian philosophy at my disposal and the lives of the Buddha, Vivekananda and Gandhi as my guides, I took the decision of living the life of a practical philosopher by “walking my talk” or “practicing what I preached.” The following episode from Gandhi’s life became my model: “Once when Mahatma Gandhi was going to give a speech, a reporter asked him what was his message for the day, he replied: ‘my life is my message.’”

By making Gandhi’s life as my model, I decided to put my desire for the good and the knowledge of the good to practice by passionately and tenaciously taking up the cause of educating the impoverished children of India.

At present, there are 50 million underprivileged children in India who are born illiterate, live a life of illiteracy and will die as illiterate because of the limited resources of the present governmental and the private educational institutions, which will be unable to provide them education. How do we impart education to these 50 million children without upsetting the stalwarts of society and the government?

To accomplish this monumental task, I needed the help and assistance of many compassionate people whose energies were not being utilized positively and creatively. In my 30 years of undergraduate teaching, I had heard many professors complaining about the lack of enthusiasm on the part of their undergraduate students to get involved in anything creative or constructive. In the opinion of some of my respected colleagues, since American students are spoiled brats, who are given everything and are accustomed to instant satisfaction, they have lost interest in taking their reading, writing, and course work seriously. Instead, this generation of students wants instant good grades without

doing any hard work and expects instant high paying jobs on graduation without a genuine exerted effort.

These two issues of illiteracy among 50 million impoverished children of India and the lack of serious interest in education on the part of the undergraduate students in the USA needed some workable solution. I pondered and asked myself the question: how would Gandhi deal with these two problems? How will he handle them? The answer became crystal clear when I could see the two problems resolving each other when one becoming a solution for the other. My goal was to provide education to the underprivileged children of India and here I had a group of young men and women as students, who had the potential to accomplish great heights if proper opportunities were provided. Since they wanted instant gratification from accomplishing something positive whether they were good grades, high paying jobs or building schools for the poor people, someone had to provide them with a vehicle through which their creative energies could be unleashed in a positive yet unthreatening way.

Establishing the Ninash Foundation:

A two sided plan was needed: the *first* of establishing a foundation and the *second* of drawing out the potential goodness of young American students. The inspiration for establishing the foundation came from my own tragic existential predicament. On one normal day, Nina, my wife of 25 years, went to the doctor for a routine physical examination and to our dismay found out that she had incurable cancer and had six months to live. This news, which came as a terrible shock, arrested our normal life.

Since both of us could not believe that she could die in six months, we decided to fight against all medical odds to save her for five years. This we accomplished through the practice of yoga, meditation, reading of books of those who survived this predicament, strict adherence to diet and positive thinking. Though these palliative measures helped Nina to survive for five years, the cancer caught up with her. A month before she died, Nina and I sat down to have our final dialogue. Nina said to me: “Ashok, when I am dead, you will forget me.” In my emotional state of love, I gave my gut response to Nina: “You will never be forgotten. Though I cannot build you a Taj Mahal, I will build schools in your memory through the establishment of a charitable foundation.” A month later Nina died and the Ninash Foundation was born by combining the name Nina and the first two letters of my name Ashok.

To fulfill this promise to my dying wife, the Ninash Foundation, a charitable organization, set up its goal of “promoting literacy among the impoverished children and adults of India.”

The seed money for the Ninash Foundation came from selling one of my houses. Other sources of funding were my book royalties, lectures at the rotaries, churches, schools and yoga lessons to students and members of the community, TV and Radio appearances in the USA, India and Holland as well as sending letters and brochures to members of scholarly societies throughout the world. However, most of the funding came from donations by compassionate students and members of the society.

Second, to achieve the goal of educating those 50 million impoverished children of India, I created the SUNY Oneonta “Learn and Serve in India” study abroad program, where undergraduate students from the USA put their “compassionate wisdom” to work by raising funds and building elementary schools for the underprivileged children of India. I worked with various student clubs at the college to raise funds for setting up elementary schools in India for the underprivileged children. These funds could be raised through bake sales, car wash, bowling thon, plays, concerts, as well as through selling T shirts, returning discarded cans and bottles, selling used books and CD’s and garage sales etc. Even as some students raised this money for the Ninash Foundation’s Indo-International Schools project, whereas others went to India on the SUNY Oneonta” Learn and Serve in India” study abroad program to help build Indo-International Schools for the impoverished children of India. While the students indulged in these altruistic endeavors, they learned to build their own character brick by brick.

These two projects took off simultaneously and miraculously.

The participants of the SUNY Oneonta “Learn and Serve in India” program started the new millennium by offering “a gift of service” to humanity by building and inaugurating the first Indo-International School in January 2000 for the 200 underprivileged children of Dundlod, Rajasthan, India. Moreover, during 2001, the American undergraduate students helped raise money for the Ninash Foundation in order to assist in the building of the second Indo-International School for 208 impoverished children of Kuran, Gujarat, an area devastated by the 2001 earthquake. Besides building the elementary school for the underprivileged children, the entire village of Kuran with 200 new houses for a

population of 1200 people was reconstructed through the funds raised by the American students.

Since the start of the new millennium, the team of the American undergraduate students and the Ninash Foundation has built two Indo-International Schools for more than 400 children belonging to the underprivileged classes. While providing the impoverished children a first rate education, these two Indo-International Schools are offering them a possibility of a dignified human life.

The successful establishment of the first two schools, offered a boost to the work of the Ninash Foundation, which during 2003, has started building the third Indo-International Art Restoration and Culture Preservation School in Mahapura, near Jaipur, Rajasthan. In this vocational school, the impoverished children of Mahapura will learn the basic skills of reading writing and arithmetic as well as the art of restoring stained glass windows in ancient castles, monuments and palaces. The learning of this ancient art will provide the children vocational training, which will help them get a job as well as they will be able to contribute to the restoration and preservation of India's cultural heritage.

Through volunteerism, the American undergraduate students are able to express their altruistic love by helping raise funds as well as to team up with the Ninash Foundation in the building of elementary schools in India. Moreover through this act of love, the American students become the vehicle that “promotes literacy among the poorest of poor children.”

The Ninash Foundation is raising funds to replicate the Indo-International Schools project in other parts of India. The foundation's goal is to build at least one school a year to educate 50 million impoverished children and transform the communities in which they live. With continued support from students, individuals, and organizations, the Ninash Foundation will build elementary schools with village libraries, establish computer and vocational centers, build medical dispensaries as well as give away milk-producing goats to the poorest families of each village. All this will improve the quality of life for some of the world's most impoverished children, one community at a time.

How can you help?

You can help the 50 million underprivileged children of India by supporting the drive to raise funds to build one new school each year in a different impoverished area. The goal is to raise a million dollars, the interest from which will help build two schools each year. Your tax-deductible contribution to the Ninash Foundation, a 501©(3) charitable organization, will directly support the project.

A donation of

\$2500 will build a classroom in a school;

\$750 will pay the salary of a teacher for a year;

\$500 will buy school supplies for an entire year;

\$400 will buy shoes for 200 children;

\$350 will build a playground for the school;

\$30 will support a child through the entire year; and

\$55,000 will help build and operate an entire school for 200 children on a self-sustaining basis.

As the individuals in the SUNY Oneonta “Learn and Serve in India” program have shown, you can make a difference.

For more information about the Ninash Foundation, the Indo-International Schools or “Learn and Serve in India,” please contact:

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NOTE: A video on the Indo-International Schools Project as “work of love” displaying the teamwork of the undergraduate students and the Ninash Foundation was shown to reveal the altruistic side of the endeavor.