

Paths to Perennial Wisdom

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Readings

from the *Bhagavad Gita*

Those who aspire to the state of yoga should seek the Self in inner solitude through meditation. With body and mind controlled they should constantly practice one-pointedness, free from expectations and attachment to material possessions. Select a clean spot, neither too high or too low, and seat yourself firmly on a cloth, a deerskin, and kusha grass. Then, once seated, strive to still your thoughts. Make your mind one-pointed in meditation, and your heart will be purified. Hold your body, head, and neck firmly in a straight line, and keep your eyes from wandering. With all fears dissolved in the peace of the Self and all actions dedicated to Brahman, controlling the mind and fixing it on me, sit in meditation with me as your only goal. With senses and mind constantly controlled through meditation, united with the Self within, an aspirant attains nirvana, the state of abiding joy and peace in me.

from an essay on "Living By Heart"

by the Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Laurel Hallman:

Living by heart begins with waiting - with pausing, sitting, looking, and taking time to let something happen within us. For goal-oriented people who structure their days with lists, it can be very difficult to pause without expectation. Most of us are willing to pause, but only if we are sure that there will be results. It takes practice to wait long enough to let something happen within our meditation and in the living of our lives. But this practice sets the foundation for everything else we do.

Begin by setting aside a time each day to sit or walk. Set up a special place that is uncluttered. Move outside if you can. If you are a morning person, sunrise is a wonderful time to begin. If you are not, choose another time and place and don't deviate from it. Pause without expectation. If you are walking, do not rush but walk as if you have nowhere to go.

Sermon

On a mundane, yet important, level of our lives I think of wisdom as whatever skill or talent or quality we have that enables us to navigate. Navigate what or where? Well, there are different varieties of wisdom to suit different endeavors and circumstances – varieties of what could be called “practical wisdom.”

For example: A good builder or carpenter has the wisdom to see how things fit together and how to proceed from one step to another to complete the project as envisioned. A good business leader has the wisdom to guide colleagues and employees in the cooperative enterprise of creating a worthwhile and useful product or service. A good school teacher has the wisdom to care for each student personally and at the same time to manage and guide an entire class toward learning the subject at hand. A good parent has the wisdom to meet the needs of a growing child with love and care, but also appropriate discipline.

And so forth: practical wisdom.

Further, though, when we think of wisdom we may also think of certain qualities that apply in any circumstance. I picked up a book a few years ago with the alluring title: *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience*, by Stephen S. Hall. Hall organized the book according to qualities we often associate with wisdom. Such things as: The art of coping, knowing what’s important, moral reasoning, compassion, humility, altruism, patience, and dealing with uncertainty.

Well, in the book Hall describes well the virtues and usefulness and beauty of these qualities; but in the end, or so it seemed to me, he was a little weak on how we develop these qualities of wisdom.

He does give us this though, which I find helpful: In his concluding chapter he quotes psychologist Joan Erikson, who wrote:

What is real wisdom? It comes from life experience, well-digested. It’s not what comes from reading great books. When it comes to understanding life, experiential learning is the only worthwhile kind: everything else is hearsay.

Great! But... how do we “well-digest” our life experience?

Well, I believe that the wisest among us “well-digest” their life experience as they *cultivate* qualities that together make for wisdom.

So, now returning to this month’s theme of “*perennial* wisdom,” it seems to me that cultivating the experience of the unity of life, which is at the heart of what is called the perennial wisdom, nourishes all the other qualities we consider hallmarks of wisdom; and at the same time conversely, consciously and directly cultivating these various

qualities of wisdom can bring us closer to an experience of oneness, of unity or kinship with all life.

How, then, to do all this?!

Here's a phrase (it could almost be a mantra) that I've come to appreciate in this regard: "Intention and attention."

To begin with, isn't *intention* essential to developing any skill or quality? So wouldn't this include developing all the qualities we call wise? Whether in relation to practical wisdom of any stripe, in relation to such virtues as patience, compassion, humility, and moral reasoning, as well as in relation to what is called perennial wisdom?

Seems to me this is so. It seems to me that to say to ourselves, "I *intend* to grow in the direction of this or that quality or experience" is a pretty good first step, in fact maybe essential. Intention.

Then: bringing "*attention*" to the work of actually growing in these ways, developing these qualities and insights.

For example: *Attention* to a moment of impatience, so that we might become more patient; noticing *attentively* when we are a little too full of ourselves, so that by contrast we might grow in appropriate humility; being aware *attentively* of a moment when we've been dismissive of someone or ignored someone's comment or, worse, their suffering, so that we might grow in compassion; and most essentially, simply being *attentive* to and present for each person in front of us, putting our selves aside and being *attentive* to this person who is every bit as precious as we are. (After all, we affirm this in our first Unitarian Universalist Principle, which names "the inherent worth and dignity of every person"; but the Principle leaves to us the task of learning the trick of life which is to speak and act as if we really did affirm this inherent worth and dignity.)

So, yes, we can *intend* to be *attentive* in all these and other ways.

Of course... not so easy to do any of this.

Which is why the world's traditions of wisdom and philosophy have all created more explicit paths, ways, towards wisdom. And though these paths all include some sort of contemplative dimension, they are not only about meditation, meditation, and more meditation.

The Buddhist Eightfold Path, for example, has a clear ethical dimension as well as a contemplative dimension. The eight parts to the path include ethical precepts of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Further, in addition to the more contemplatively oriented Right View, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration is Right Intention.

And we are exhorted to remember that each element of the path is essential to the whole, which means that, for example, none of it would succeed without Right Intention; which also means that simply meditating without also being attentive ethically is not enough either.

In short, the Eightfold Path suggests that the path to wisdom – and wisdom itself – involves the whole of life. The path to wisdom is not meant to be a little hobby. The path to wisdom – and wisdom itself, every variety of wisdom – is at the very *heart* of life and of life well-lived.

This brings to mind, not incidentally, my understanding of what we call spirituality, since another way of talking about paths to wisdom is to think of them as spiritual paths. So how are we to understand this much used and sometimes abused word “spiritual”?

You’ve heard me say this before. (I might have said it last week!). I return to the Latin root of the word spiritual, which is “spiritus” or breath. So, just as our physical breath sustains our biological life, so is “spirituality” anything which gives us life in all its fullness, which opens us to others, opens us to compassion and kindness, opens us to beauty, opens us to the whole of life, the whole which makes our individual lives possible, which sustains us.

In short, a “path to wisdom” is a spiritual path.

Let me say a word or two about my own path, my chosen navigational tools – call it a path in the direction (I hope!) of a little more wisdom, call it a spiritual path. This is certainly not to suggest that mine is the best or only path, not at all; rather, it’s just one example that may spur your reflection on your own path or paths.

First, as I said a moment ago, I’ve come to realize that my spiritual practices, my path in the direction of wisdom is indeed about my whole life, not only about twenty minutes engaged in some discipline that many would define as “spiritual.”

So – most days I begin with a run which awakens both body and spirit by getting me in motion as well as getting me outside into the natural world, reminding me viscerally that I am part of this larger natural world, not apart from it, as I breathe in the oxygen that those trees and that grass and brush are breathing out, and as I marvel at the morning show of the sunrise.

Then, after breakfast just about every day I take some time reading a few passages from one of the old texts from which we hear most Sundays: Bible, Gita, Tao Te Ching, Buddhist scripture, Rumi...

I find that even a few minutes of such reading grounds my mind, heart, and spirit (and my day). Then I write, reflecting on those words as well on my life. Again, even a few minutes of writing helps to ground me at the start of my day.

Next, in the course of the day I just try, and naturally enough not always with success, to be present, mindful to each task, each moment – and most especially to each person.

Finally, sometime most afternoons I pause altogether for ten or twenty minutes or more and meditate, watching my breath, often repeating silently a wisdom passage (often

the Prayer of St. Francis), calling to mind people I know who are ill or struggling in some way, holding loved ones in the light of love.

Why? Well, the Quaker William Penn admonished us with these words:

In the rush and noise of life, as you have intervals, step home within yourselves, and be still. Wait upon God to feel His presence. This will carry you evenly through your day's business.

If the overtly religious language in Penn's second sentence is not your language, you can skip that sentence and it seems to me that the admonition still works.

One more piece of my path, and by no means the least important. I am part of groups here at Old Ship that engage in what I have long called "conversations about things that matter" – the classes I lead or co-lead, the study groups, the conversations after church, Men's Breakfast, not to mention the ongoing conversation that has this hour each Sunday morning at its heart. We learn from each other, grow in the presence of each other, maybe get a little wiser in the presence of and inspired by each other. So these gatherings too are part of my path toward (I hope) a little more wisdom.

Now, I haven't always done all this, and my practices, the shape of my days and my life, may certainly change in years to come. Likewise, of course your practice or practices in the direction of wisdom, in the direction of waking up to the fullness of life, are no doubt different from mine.

But whatever we each do in the direction of wisdom and awakening will inevitably have "intention" and "attention" in common. You might want to remember that, if you remember nothing else from this morning: Intention and attention.

One more thought you may wish to remember. And it may sound simplistic cliché. But I think there is important truth in it: The path is in a real sense already the goal, or at least a goodly portion of the goal.

When I was in college and first learning about something called "enlightenment"... well, I wanted it and wanted it all at once!

But it didn't come all at once! Few things do. And this may never!

But over the years I've come to realize that, yes, the path is in many ways already the goal. To be on the path is good enough!

Just keeping on, beginning again every day, not about perfection, picking ourselves up when we fall, and hopefully gaining in some life skills of practical wisdom, learning from mistakes and wrong turns, learning in the midst of trial and tribulation and grief, but keeping on, with *intention* to do better, to be a little kinder, with *attention* to our own lives and to one another, as we strive to digest well our individual life experience, as Joan Erikson put it, in the context of the larger life of which we are a part.

With no expectation of instant or even any “results”, or exactly the nature of the results, but maybe with increasing confidence in the rightness of our path as it evolves.

Just on the path, your whole life involved on the path, with no expectations but maybe with a taste now and then of that perennial wisdom that affirms we are each individual manifestations of the one larger Reality: call it God, Brahman, Tao, Source... a taste of cosmic belonging more likely to come as we practice opening our hearts to life and to one another, here and now, each moment.

Not always easy, none of this. But good work!

So may it ever be. Amen.