

## **Practical Wisdoms for Flourishing in Difficult Situations**

Paul T. P. Wong, Ph.D., C.Psych.

We all have experienced complex and difficult situations, which baffle the mind and defy rational solutions. All the scientific knowledge and technology in the world are of little help in the face of an urgent but ill-defined problem. Even the well-established principles in psychology and ethics fail to show us the right path.

Just imagine yourself stranded in a strange land, struggling through the jungle without a compass, with danger lurking everywhere. A single misstep can lead to a death trap. You have no one to turn to for help. That is when you desperately need special wisdom or divine guidance. Consider the following scenarios:

Your life is full of darkness and pain, and it becomes worse with each passing day. Pills and talk-therapy have only provided some temporary relief. You hate being you, but you cannot escape from yourself. You are very, very tired of the futile struggles. There is no exit. Death seems to be better option than living the way you are. Yet, you don't have the courage to take your own life. How can you find a way out?

You are caught between a rock and a hard place. Two opposing powerful forces within the organization try to get you on board. Taking side can expose you to serious consequences, especially if you cast your lot with the losing side. But sitting on the fence will offend both parties and expose yourself to even greater danger. What should you do?

You are the newly appointed project manager. Immediately, you discover that the most valuable and productive members of your team refuse to accept your leadership. They are also turning others against you. At the same time, your boss pressures you to successfully complete the project on time. How do you handle the mutiny without jeopardizing the project?

For many years you have been misunderstood, ostracized, maligned, betrayed, abused, and scapegoated for all the wrong reasons. Others constantly impute bad motives to you – you want to show off; you do not respect the existing culture; and you are insensitive to other people's feelings. But in your heart of hearts, you know that your conscience is clear and your motive is pure. All you ever want is to do the right thing for the benefits of others, but your innovative and creative solutions invariably run into opposition from those who care more about looking good than solving problems. Should you remain faithful to your own ideals or change your ways in order to avoid unrelenting abuse?

You work in a toxic and oppressive organization, where everyone is motivated by fear. You want to blow a whistle on their unethical practices, but you do not have

enough hard evidence. Besides, your boss is very powerful and well connected. You may end up in jail, if you cannot provide irrefutable evidence to support your charges. You cannot quit because it is very difficult to find another job in your area of expertise. How can you survive in such an environment without selling your soul? What options do you have?

There is an endless array of complex life situations, which pose a personal crisis and a moral dilemma. Each situation is unique, because of the different mix of personal circumstances, interpersonal dynamics and the historical context. Do you have the wisdom to do the right thing when the stakes are high and the tensions are mounting? Do you have the wisdom to live a positive life even when everything around you is negative?

Henry David Thoreau once said: "It is characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things." Wisdom reveals its beauty and value in darkness and pain, when the rare individuals not only find a way out in seemingly impossible situations, but also do so with honor and integrity. But what is wisdom? How do we develop it? Why so few people possess wisdom?

### **The nature of wisdom**

Looking into the nature of wisdom can be a bewildering experience. There is no universally accepted definition of wisdom, because this construct has so many different facets. According to the WordNet developed by the Cognitive Science Laboratory of Princeton University, wisdom ([www.cogsci.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/webwn2.1/](http://www.cogsci.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/webwn2.1/)) can be defined in the following ways:

- Accumulated knowledge or erudition or enlightenment
- The trait of utilizing knowledge and experience with common sense and insight
- Ability to apply knowledge or experience or understanding or common sense and insight
- The quality of being prudent and sensible
- Wisdom of Solomon

Robert J. Sternberg (2004) defines wisdom as the use of one's intelligence and experience based on one's values to achieve good results. He proposes a balance theory of wisdom, emphasizing the ability to achieve a balance between intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests over both the short and long terms. It also involves the ability to balance between adapting to existing environments and selecting new ones.

But who is able to possess all the above abilities? Where can we find such a wise person? Is there anyone who can penetrate the mystery of wisdom? Sternberg (1990) once admitted: "we cannot quite comprehend the nature of wisdom because of our own lack of wisdom" (p.3). His humble admission may have inadvertently revealed the beginning of true wisdom -- which is to

understand the limitation of knowledge and fragility of intelligence.

### Limitations of intelligence

Psychologists may have focused too much on intellectual abilities and cognitive processes at the expense of spiritual and moral dimensions of wisdom (e.g., Dixon & Baltes, 1986; Sternberg, 1985, 1990). In fact, relying on scientific knowledge may have contributed to the decline of wisdom in Western societies (Marcel, 1951).

True wisdom may operate on a different level of consciousness and inhabit a different world, unfamiliar to the most learned intellectuals, but open to those who are humble and receptive to transcendental revelations. It is difficult for anyone to grasp the sublime, spiritual nature of wisdom, if they have never experienced it. This may have accounted for the limitations of psychological research on wisdom.

The more I get to know the intellectual elites, those with doctoral degrees from prestigious universities and tons of scholarly publications, the more I am puzzled by their lack of wisdom in dealing with human relationships and other practical issues in life. The hall of higher learning is sometimes like a ship of fools with inflated egos, floating around in an ocean of knowledge and information without a clear destination or higher purpose. Seekers of wisdom may need to look elsewhere for answers to life's many pressing problems.

### **The wisdom of Ann Frank**

Let's consider the case of Ann Frank, a German-Jewish teenage, who was forced into hiding for 25 months in an annex during the Holocaust. This 13-year-old girl kept a diary of her experiences and thoughts until her arrest. Here is one of the later entries in her Diary ([http://www.annefrank.com/2\\_life\\_excerpts.htm](http://www.annefrank.com/2_life_excerpts.htm))

"It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart. It's utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more" July 15, 1944.

Where did she acquire such maturity, wisdom and idealism? Did suffering speed up her mental development or did she receive the gift of wisdom from God? If a young girl can reveal such profound insight and understanding of life, then wisdom must be based on something more than just intellect, knowledge and experience.

### A new definition of wisdom

Therefore, I propose the following definition of wisdom:

*Wisdom may be defined as a special gift or ability to see clearly, discern correctly, understand deeply, and judge appropriately. It is based on the humility and openness to listen and learn from unlikely sources, including the mouth of a child and the whisper of a dying man. It involves the courage to be true to oneself, to do what is right and to achieve maximum good in spite of situational constraints and personal dangers. As a spiritual gift, it is to be received with humility and gratitude; as a human ability, cultivated with diligence; and as a character of authenticity and courage, practiced consistently.*

There are basically four kinds of people with respect to wisdom. A few gifted ones intuitively grasp wisdom without much help. Others learn wisdom from the sages and mentors. Most people though acquire wisdom the hard way -- through the school of hard knocks. And then there are the fools -- those who are unable to acquire wisdom not because of their limited mental capacity, but rather because of their false confidence in their own intellect and abilities.

### **Wisdom traditions**

The human heart is always searching for wisdom, knowing that it is the key to survival and flourishing. That is why the world is rich in wisdom traditions from Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, to Judeo-Christian and the Indigenous. In every nation, every tribe, there are also folk wisdoms summed up in proverbs and maxims. Psychology has much to learn from these wisdom traditions.

### **The Hellenic tradition**

Hellenic wisdom writings are based on philosophical systems. Their concepts of wisdom include *sophia* (contemplative wisdom), *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *episteme* (knowledge of nature of things). Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Sachs, 2002) represents the best of the reflective Hellenic approach.

According to Aristotle, *phronesis* (or prudence) bridges between intellectual virtue and moral virtues. Prudence is essential for the good life, because by focusing on the mean, one is able to avoid excesses. The prudent man is able to see what is truly good in any circumstances, and act appropriately. The virtue of prudence is developed by the habit of exercising sound judgment and doing what is morally or ethically right.

One of Aristotle's great insights is his discovery that practical wisdom is needed to live according to virtues, and that the ultimate goal of happiness or flourishing (*eudaimonia*) can be achieved only through virtuous living. Virtue (*arête*) is consisted of not isolated acts but rather "a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions" (Wikipedia, 2005).

### **The Hebraic tradition**

The Hebraic wisdom tradition is best represented by books of *Job*, *Proverbs*,

*Ecclesiastes, and Wisdom of Solomon.* The "wisdom" (Hokhmah) of these writings emphasizes wisdom as revelations from God in addressing practical issues of life. As such, wisdom is valued more than any other human possession. The book of *Proverbs* provides a portrait of wisdom:

- “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (1:7)
- “For the Lord gives wisdom, and from His mouth come knowledge and understanding” (2:6).
- “Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her” (3:13-15).
- “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom” (11:2).
- “A man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth” (29:3).

As a young man, King Solomon asks for wisdom more than anything else. As a result, “God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt” (1 Kings 4:29-30).

### **The Christian tradition**

Built upon the Hebraic teachings of divine revelation, Christianity focuses on the truths as revealed through Jesus Christ. The New Testament prescription for an abundant life may sound foolish and simplistic to those who only depend on human wisdom. Here are five basic guidelines:

- Faith -- “Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never go thirsty’” (John 6:35).
- Humility – “Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children’” (Matthew 11:25).
- Prayer -- “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5).
- Doing good deeds -- “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (James 3:13).

- Doing God's will -- "Be very careful, then, how you live -- not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (Ephesians 5:15-17).

These simple principles are capable of healing and transforming shattered lives. But then why are there so many foolish Christians? The answer can be found in the following parable given by Jesus:

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash" (Matt. 7:24-27).

### The Buddhist tradition

The Buddhist tradition emphasizes enlightenment and spiritual discipline. The life story of Gautama Siddhartha, who later became known as Shakyamuni Buddha, is very instructive to our understanding of Buddhism. All the wealth and comforts in the royal palace could not fulfill this young Prince's inner yearnings for meaning and wisdom. At the age of 29, Gautama renounced his secular life and embarked on a long and dangerous journey for spiritual truth.

Gautama sought for an answer to the questions of the Four Pains -- the pains of birth, of aging, of illness, and of death. He wanted to find out how to be liberated from suffering and afflictions; he sought to understand the truth of life. No matter how hard he tried to learn from spiritual teachers, no one could give him a satisfactory answer. Eventually, he attained initial enlightenment meditating under the papal tree (which later known as the Bodhi tree or the tree of enlightenment).

As he analyzed the law of cause and effect and searched into his own mind, he discovered the Four Noble Truths (the Truth of Suffering, the Truth of Cause, the Truth of Extinction and the Truth of the Path). Suffering is inevitable, because of our ignorance about the impermanent and illusory nature of earthly things and our clinging too tightly to things beyond our control. The only way to attain liberation and Nirvana is through enlightenment.

Shakyamuni prescribed the Noble Eightfold Path as the royal road to enlightenment:

1. Right view -- seeing the world according to the Four Noble Truths
2. Right thought -- reflecting on your own thoughts according to the Noble

### Truths

3. Right speech – speaking with truth and loving consideration for others
4. Right action – doing work consistent with your inner light
5. Right living – valuing each day and living carefully
6. Right effort – practicing self-reflection and spiritual discipline
7. Right mindfulness – gaining control of your mental life
8. Right concentration – attaining mental serenity through meditation

According to Prof. Chen Yu-Hsi of Fo Guang University, enlightenment and the discipline of meditation are essential to attain the supreme wisdom of Sunyata, Emptiness or Nirvana. At the advanced state of spiritual development, one experiences the power of prajna -- the wisdom of liberation from delusion, craving and suffering.

Enlightenment may have broader, practical implications according to Okawa (2002):

“Enlightenment is the answer to the question, ‘How can I, born into such a transient world on Earth, find a reason for living, a reason for being there?’ In other words, enlightenment is the heightening of our awareness, an understanding of the objective and mission of our lives, and knowledge of the secrets of the universe. Ultimately, enlightenment is ‘understanding’ in the truest sense, and this gives us a great sense of happiness and strength. I would like you to understand that enlightenment is not a limited concept aiming only at the development of the individual; rather, it implies that each individual shines with a unique light” (p.163).

### **The importance of spiritual wisdoms**

It is not be possible to review all the wisdom traditions. Suffice to say that except for the Hellenic tradition, most wisdom traditions contain spiritual wisdoms for daily living. Instead of emphasizing intellectual understanding of the physical world, the wisdom literature has a mystical, otherworldly understanding of human existence, and provides answer to the perplexing larger questions of life and death.

When King David wrote: “Surely You desire truth in the inner parts; You teach me wisdom in the inmost place” (Psalm 51:6), he referred to an inner sanctuary where he could directly commune with God.

God can impart wisdom by breathing into our souls, when we draw near to Him. In the secret inner space, in quiet solitude with our own souls, we can draw strength and wisdom from the Creator. Some of the most important decisions in human history and in our own lives have been made through quietly listening to the Spirit.

### **Profiles of wise people**

Now that we have examined both psychological and spiritual concepts of wisdom, we can begin to construct a composite portrait of wise people.

1. They understand the meaning of life: They have a clear sense of who they are, why they are here, what they are supposed to do, where they are going, and how to be happy in the face of suffering and death.
2. They are able to penetrate the surface and see things as they really are (Okawa, 2002).
3. They are able to integrate and balance between opposites and contradictions (Macdonald, 1993; Sternberg, 2004).
4. They are self-actualizing and able to transcend constraints (Maslow, 1999).
5. They are able to make the right decisions in the midst of confusions, tensions and competing interests.
6. They understand the human heart and discern God's will through the Holy Spirit (The Bible).
7. They are humble and open, willing to learn from everyone.
8. They know and accept their own limitations, and then take steps to improve themselves.
9. They know what really matters and what has enduring values.
10. They have a heightened capacity for self-reflection and moral sensitivity.
11. They have a large vision as if they can see the future.
12. They have the courage to be true to their own convictions.
13. They dare to do what is right in spite of oppositions and threats to their own lives.
14. They keep the faith that eventually goodness and justice will prevail and that their decisions will be validated.
15. They have the capacity to imagine what life could be and know how to realize their dreams.
16. They have a sense of freedom and serenity whatever their situations, because they can live in their inner sanctuary and are connected with God.
17. They respond to all the challenges and opportunities of life on a moment-to-moment basis.



18. They are willing to experiment and try innovative solutions in spite of stiff resistance and opposition.
19. They surrender their self-interests to the common good.
20. They submit to some higher principles and purposes.
21. They have the purity of heart and clarity of mind, unencumbered by trivial, earthly concerns.
22. They are attuned to the spiritual world and experience the harmony with the universe.
23. They have an expanded sense of self that encompasses others and God.
24. They avoid excesses and know how to act appropriately for each situation.
25. They are very focused and disciplined in order to attain their higher calling.

### **A portrait of intellectual fools**

There are all kinds of fools, but the most intriguing ones are the bright fools. They appear to be intelligent and even religious, but they still make a mess of their lives because of their lack of wisdom. They feel miserable, because they don't understand that the pathway to happiness is not power and fame but wisdom and understanding. Here is a composite picture of the well-educated smart fools:

1. They win the whole world but lose their own souls.
2. They live as if they will never die.
3. They want to play God, because they think that God either does not exist or he does not care.
4. They are more concerned about looking good than acting right.
5. Their conscience is seared by greed and arrogance.
6. They have too much knowledge and information but very little human understanding.
7. Their hubris prevents them from listening to words of wisdom from others.
8. They are too busy defending and justifying their actions that they are not able to learn from their mistakes.
9. They are unaware of their own blind spots and foolishness.
10. Their judgments are often clouded and distorted by false assumptions, biases and self-interests.
11. Their course of action is often dictated by how to win the turf-war rather than how to resolve the conflict.

12. They like to hide behind their position of authority and overrule good decisions.
13. They subscribe to dominant paradigms and conventional wisdoms and resent innovative solutions.
14. They intellectualize everything and rarely consider the spiritual and humane dimensions of their actions.
15. They are guided by expediency rather than principles.
16. They often lose big by gaining small advantages.
17. They would not hesitate to lie to cover up their wrong doings.
18. They never say what they mean and never mean what they say.
19. They use people and exploit relationships for their own gains.
20. They don't have the courage to stand up for what is right and just.
21. Their world is very small, because they only live for themselves.
22. They think that they are smart enough to fool everyone including God.
23. They don't recognize their boundaries and limitations.
24. They are always ready to make deals, without realizing that they may have dealt away their souls to the devil.
25. When the house they built collapses, they even do not realize that it has been built on sand.

### **Conclusions**

The path to wisdom is narrow and hazardous, while the road to the fools' paradise is always wide and welcoming. Even if wisdom remains an illusive ideal, the very act of pursuing it can make you stay away from the deadly trap of folly.

Given what you have learned about wisdom, how would you handle the scenarios described in the beginning of this paper? The choice you make will have serious, practical implications. Are you discouraged, when you are punished for choosing to do the right thing? Don't lose heart and stay the course. In the long run, wisdom always wins.

My take home message is that **wisdom is the touchstone of character rather than intellect**. There is always a spiritual and moral quality to wisdom; one cannot become wise simply by living inside one's own head. Here is my prayer for all my readers.

*May you be grounded in reality, guided by a sound mind, and enlightened by the Spirit. May God show you the right path in a dark and crooked world. Let your*

*light so shine that others may be inspired to pursue Wisdom – the only priceless possession.*

## References

- Dixon, R. A., & Baltes, P. B. (1986). Toward life-span research on the functions and pragmatics of intelligence. In R. K. Wagner & R. J. Sternberg (Eds.), *Practical intelligence: Nature and origins of competence in the everyday world*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Macdonald, C. (1996). *Toward wisdom: Finding our way to inner peace, love, and happiness*. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Co., Inc.
- Marcel, G. (1955). *The decline of wisdom*. London: Philosophical Library.
- Maslow, A. (1999). *Toward a psychology of being*, (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Okawa, R. (2002). *The Essence of Buddha: The path to enlightenment*. London, UK: Time Warner Paperbacks
- Sachs, J. (2002). *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (Philosophical Library Series)*. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Company.
- Sternberg, R. J. (1985). Implicit theories of intelligence, creativity and wisdom. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 49, 607-627.
- Sternberg, R. J. (1990). *Wisdom: Its nature, origins and development*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Sternberg, R. J. (2004). What is wisdom and how can we develop it? *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, No. 1, 164-174.
- The Thompson Chain Reference Bible (1983). *New International Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers
- Wikipedia (2005). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Retrieved June 4, 2005 from <http://www.answers.com/topic/nicomachean-ethics?method=8>