

# The Highest Form Of Wisdom

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## ABSTRACT

What is wisdom and how does it differ from knowledge? Is it something we develop or discover? And how do our lives today help or hinder us in getting wisdom?

### 1. Introduction

We learn best through stories, by visualising a situation and what happens, and taking lessons that we can use later. Is this a form of learning that is still relevant in our modern, fast paced lives? For example do ancient Zen koans still have anything to teach us? For example, what does this story do for you?

The teacher Unmon said to his students, “I do not ask you about fifteen days ago. But what do you have to say about fifteen days from now?” No one answered, so he said for them, “Every day is a good day.”

### 2. Looking for meaning between the cracks

How many of us do what we want to do? If you are a doctor, for example, did you go into the profession because you wanted to care for people? Were you attracted by the salary? Was it something your family guided you towards? Did you wake up one morning and find that you were a stressed and overworked professional, struggling to cope with the pressures of seeing patients, completing paperwork and having some semblance of a relationship with your family.

If you work in a different field — as a teacher, a police officer, a supermarket manager — the chances are that you see your job as stressful or work with people who do.

So, what is it about life that means so many people are willing to live this way: to spend their lives moving from situation to situation where they feel out of control? Is it because they have no choice in the matter — the choices they have already made have chained them to the life they now live? The obligations they have taken on such as the mortgage, the cars and the need to show what a great life they’re having on social media mean they need the job they have and the

money it brings in, Are people really just a pay cheque or two away from disaster?

Is it perhaps that we are too busy to appreciate the things we already have. If you live in the West, for example, there are places where you get clean air, clean water and clean surroundings without asking. A city of a few hundred thousand people can organise itself in a way that works and where the basics are taken care of. What about a city of a few tens of millions, one where people move to every day? The kind of mega city that is the norm in developing parts of the world? How do people cope there?

At the same time are these problems just ones that happen at a certain point in time. In New York, for example, at one time the growth of the city led to an enormous problem with horse dung as people travelled around the city. You rarely hear that complaint now, as the car and mass-transit systems didn’t solve the problem but simply caused it to stop existing. They have created new problems in turn that we worry about now, of course, but that is another matter.

So many questions. How can we find answers?

### 3. What we must do

It is tempting to look for solutions. It seems natural to go to those wiser than ourselves, to people who have done it before. To experts. Which should remind us of another story.

A student was finding it difficult to make progress so his teacher sent him on an errand that would take many months. The student was worried that this would take more time from his studies and so his friend offered to come along and do everything he could to help him study, even when travelling.

One evening, when they had been on the road for a while,

the friend said sadly, “You know I want to help in every way I can, but there are five things I can’t do for you.”

“What are they?”

“When you are hungry or thirsty, you must eat for yourself. When you hear the call of nature, you must answer it yourself. And, when travelling, you must carry your own body along the road.”

It seems to me that there are only two ways in which you can add value to the world. You can labour and you can teach. The two are inextricably linked. You do not grow if you do only one or the other — both are necessary to live a good life.

Why would knowing this matter in this day and age? It is easier to ask why you would do anything else. These two seem like the most natural things for us to do.

In a documentary narrated by David Attenborough we see how a mother monkey teaches its baby how to live in the tropical rain forest. It takes many years as she teaches her child which fruits are safe to eat, how to move from tree to tree and how to create a shelter from the relentless rain. This is no different from what happens to us in life.

A plumber, for example, goes through an apprenticeship with a master. Learning starts with labour, with the use of the tools of your profession. Learning continues with practice, as you become better at doing the things you need to be able to do. And then learning deepens through teaching others, by learning how to communicate what you know and, in doing so, understanding it even more.

That is why some consultancies work and others fail. The natural order of things is for groups to work together and learn together. They are suspicious of outsiders, reluctant to trust those outside their tribe. This is why, if you wish to work with others, you bring gifts — gifts of learning are the ones most prized by those in the group.

It’s simple, really. The value you bring is a function of the work you do and the teaching you give.

#### 4. How much do you want something?

A child said to me, “I do not feel like playing. I cannot draw because I have only my brother’s notebook. I want to do something.”

*The Tao of Pooh* tells us that inside us all live the characters of *The Hundred Acre Wood*. We have the busy and self-important rabbit, the pessimistic Eeyore, academic Owl, bouncy Tigger

and timid Piglet. We also have Pooh, a bear so in tune with his essential nature that life, to him, is really quite simple.

When we are children, we think we can do anything — small people are not afraid to sing and draw and play. As we get older, we set aside childish things, we start to worry about how things look, which toys are for boys and which ones for girls. We become, in short, grown up. And when a child grows up he or she starts to learn Useful Things and finds a place in society.

Over time we learn more and more and fill our minds with Worldly Knowledge. We feel we know how things should work, how society should be ordered and accept the way in which we live as normal. Which makes it hard to think of any other way that anything could possibly work.

A student asked Socrates, “How do I learn all you know?” Socrates walked him into a lake and held him underwater until his lungs nearly burst and then let him up and said,

“When you desire knowledge as much as you desired a breath of air then you shall have it.”

#### 5. Conclusion

We must each work towards gaining wisdom in our own way. It helps if we learn to see like children, with wonder and without fear. Knowledge is not enough and action is not enough. What we need is both — action informed by knowledge but wisdom comes when what we know and what we do is used to do good.

The only Zen you will find on the tips of mountains is the Zen you bring up there — Robert Pirsig.

#### About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

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