

Wisdom and a philosophical exercise ***Anette Prins***

To be able to write sensible words on wisdom shouldn't one be wise oneself? If that is true, I can stop right here! I may try to live as a philosopher, but I don't think that I am wise. Maybe I can write about the search for wisdom, as for me that is what philosophy is: a quest for wisdom out of love for truth.

What is wisdom? Or to ask the same question in a more concrete way: what is a wise person? Reviewing the lives and writings of various sages I arrive at some kind of conclusion: a sage is someone who, based on experience of life, has a profound understanding of the nature of reality and of man and who is willing to live according to these insights.

These three aspects, experience of life, understanding and the will to put into practice what one knows, are interdependent. Reflecting upon an experience of life results in understanding. Understanding prepares me to be more aware of what I am living and to gain new experiences. Understanding and experience of life only grant me wisdom if I have the strength of will to put my insights into practice. I have read somewhere the expression 'a willing mind' and that is probably another way to say what wisdom is: a willing mind to practice what I know, to gain experience of life which lead to new insights and a greater understanding of myself and others. Wisdom is like a spiral movement: experience of life, understanding and application follow each other each time on a deeper level.

Wisdom also has to do with freedom and responsibility. Awareness and understanding will give me a sense of freedom. The more wisdom I gain, the greater will be my freedom. Greater knowledge, awareness and understanding grant me greater freedom, but also greater responsibility. How much freedom can I have? How much responsibility can I take? How much wisdom can I bear?

If studying and practising philosophy can lead to the attainment of wisdom, philosophers are not alone in their search for wisdom. Among scientists, artists, shoemakers, farmers or any other profession, we find seekers of wisdom. Being a philosopher could very well be one of the most indirect ways leading to wisdom. The philosopher's vast knowledge, critical mind and continuous questioning help him along on his way to wisdom, but he might ask himself, considering the history of philosophy, how far these will get him? Many philosophical texts are so full of thoughts, ideas and reasoning that in spite of their theoretical pertinence, we can not call them wise. They focus too much on thought while neglecting the aspects of life. Wisdom is about thought and life, theory and practice. Only where we find both there is hope for wisdom.

As a philosophical counsellor I have become well aware of this lack of wisdom in philosophy. With each client I am confronted with a different question or problem of daily life. I realise time and again that they are much more in need of wisdom than of philosophy. At the same time I think that one can only attain wisdom, when one has travelled along a path that leads towards it. Philosophy is one way to travel towards wisdom. But to be able to attain wisdom, one should not only philosophise, but also practice what one thinks. It is in putting into practice the insights one has gained from philosophising, that wisdom comes within reach.

For a philosophical counsellor it is often difficult to find texts that are appropriate for use in counselling. A lot of texts are interesting from a philosophical point of view but they are too theoretical; and a client wants to see the link with daily life. At the same time this might be the challenge of this profession: to succeed in adapting those rich, but highly abstract philosophical texts to the questions and problems of daily life. It happens that the philosopher in me is satisfied with the reasoning and the reflecting, while the counsellor in me still has to do some work to make the link with the concrete case. And sometimes the counsellor is satisfied, while the philosopher continues her endless quest for more and deeper insight in the matter at hand.

Realising that the search for wisdom is not the monopoly of philosophers, the philosophical counsellor can look elsewhere to find guiding and inspiration. Poetry is literally a treasure. Many clients come to see a philosophical counsellor because they are stuck somewhere in their thinking. When our logic and reasoning fail, our imagination can sometimes help us to see alternatives and new perspectives or simply show us the next step to take. Poetry triggers the imagination in various ways and therefore can be used for that quality in philosophical counselling.

In poetry we can find abstract thinking applied to life, and life brought to a higher level, ideas expressed with beauty, feeling and emotion transformed into art. Art is universal. The insights poets sometimes express in their poetry come close to wisdom. As the wisdom of art transcends specific religious or spiritual currents, it is close to philosophy. As poetic texts are normally short, they are easy to use with clients. Their density allows for various interpretations enabling the client and the philosopher to look at the text from their own viewpoint, but also to see the various layers of reality.

Poets do not need to be wise themselves to be able to write wise words. I have learned a lot about wisdom from poets. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke gives an example of practising wisdom in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, where he writes:

"I would like to invite you (...) to have some patience in front of all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the question itself like a locked room, like books written in a foreign language. Do not look for answers that cannot be given to you, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. For the moment just live your questions. Maybe little by little you will live one day, without noticing it, into the answer." (Rilke, p21)

Letting life follow its course. Taking time to live my life. Being aware of the presence of my questions and problems and live them instead of jumping immediately to conclusions or groping frantically for the answers. Isn't that wisdom?

Living 'into' the answers, instead of looking for solutions and trying to find answers, means that I don't have to do anything, although this does not mean that I should be passive. It goes much more in the direction of what in the Chinese tradition is called *wu wei*. *Wu wei* does not tell us to be active or passive. It asks us not to interfere with the course of life. In that perspective the choice between being active or passive becomes meaningless. This is very well expressed in one of the fundamental texts of Chinese Chan buddhism, the *Hsin-hsin-ming*, written in the 7th century by the third Zen patriarch Seng-Ts'an, where it says:

"Whoever tries to find rest by ceasing activity, will only find restlessness. As long as one chooses between opposites one will never experience the whole."

Activity and passivity, calmness and alertness, movement and rest do no longer exclude each other, but become complementary. Being calm and alert at the same time, experiencing vigilant passivity: that is *wu wei*.

The *I Ching*, the Chinese *Book of Change*, gives an example of this merging of calmness and alertness in hexagram 52, that is called *The Mountain* or *Standing Still*. The idea expressed in this hexagram is that rest is the momentary equilibrium of contrary movements or forces. So physical rest is the equilibrium between the forces of gravitation and the muscular tension of the body. Mental rest or tranquillity is also an equilibrium. It is the equilibrium between initiative and receptivity. This means that there is no need for mental deliberation anymore; the mind knows when it is time for action or time for rest.

To illustrate this idea of dynamic rest let us compare it to our respiration. Its four stages of inhaling, being full of air, exhaling and being empty are following each other naturally so that their movement becomes restful. Being in rest in that case could not mean: stop the movement and stay with lungs full or empty! We would die if we managed to do it. Being in rest means that we let the body function in its natural way. The less we force, the more we let go, the easier we come to rest. This means that I can be in rest while moving, as long as my movements are natural and adapted to myself and my situation.

Wu wei expresses the Chinese idea of wisdom, according to which the human mind will know tranquillity as long as it does not chose its viewpoint. Not choosing a viewpoint means to free oneself from the partial view of reality. Wisdom means having a global perception of reality. Instead of seeing everything from a certain point of view and so excluding all other perspectives, the sage sees all points of view at the same time and gives them equal importance. Instead of judging between good and bad, true and false, the sage understands both sides and perceives how each one is right in its own way. A sage focuses on the harmony between all viewpoints.

In the Chinese tradition the sage is not someone who tries to live according to a middle course between two opposites. He seems to adopt a middle course, but if we look at it more closely, we understand that he does not do so to prevent himself from deviating too much to one or the other side. The middle course in Chinese wisdom is not excluding the extremes, but including them. Living according to the middle course means being able to conduct oneself in diametrically opposite ways with the same ease. Instead of going only halfway on either side, the sage lets himself go freely in both directions without any preference and with the ability to assimilate both positions. Now it becomes clear that even immoderate positions or extreme experiences can belong to the middle course of wisdom.

Wisdom is based on a totally open mind. Just as water takes the form of the recipient, but has no fixed form itself, or as fire adapts itself to whatever it burns, but is formless, in the same way the wise mind conforms itself to every situation without having a viewpoint itself. A wise man or woman does not look for originality. Instead of trying to think differently from others and trying to find new ideas, as most philosophers do, the sage strives to understand and to reconcile all possible viewpoints in his mind.

Once you have attained wisdom there is no need to look for anything anymore. The sage does not look for meaning: things are as they are. That is the conclusion and the starting point of the sage. He does not say "so be it" as the religious person would, nor does he ask with the philosopher: "Why is it like that?". No (religious) acquiescence, no (philosophical) wonder, no acceptance, no interrogation, but simply the realisation that it is as it is.

The wise man goes with the flow, but does not have a goal. Wisdom leads nowhere as everything is already there. The sage does not go anywhere as he is always where he should be. Philosophy or religion, even though they differ basically from each other, both lead somewhere: to wisdom or truth, to God. Wisdom does not offer any revelation: everything is as it is. If wisdom is the goal of philosophy, it has itself no goal other than itself.

However, it is important to realise that the idea of wisdom as going with the flow is based on the Chinese idea of wisdom. The ancient Greek defined the sage as someone who is always one and the same. While in classical Chinese language there was no character to express 'being' in its absolute sense, in Western thought the basic mode is being.

Although in Western philosophy we are confronted from the very beginning with a tension between being and becoming, as is illustrated by the work of Parmenides and Heraclitus, the opposition is a static one and has nothing in common with the Chinese idea of a dynamic equilibrium between opposites. According to the vision of reality of the Western man being and becoming exclude each other, while in Chinese philosophy they would include each other.

The Greek philosophers have reflected on becoming, but always with reference to being. The absolute in Western thought is being that has been conceived as the One or the Unique that excludes change as well as multiplicity and has given birth to concepts as the Good or the Truth. In Chinese thought the One, the Eternal or the Truth have never been conceived as absolutes, but always as temporary modes that include change and multiplicity. Chinese thought does not conceive being as the goal or absolute of becoming, but only as the equal opposite and complement of it. The nature of reality is a continuous movement, not a becoming that leads to being, but a way by which reality renews itself continuously. This way of continuous renewal is called *tao*. Wisdom means following *tao*. As *tao* is the principle of reality, everybody lives according to *tao*. There are, however, different levels of awareness that lead to different attitudes towards *tao*.

The mythical Chinese sage Lao Tse says about living according to *tao* the following:

Since the world points up beauty as such,
There is ugliness too.
If goodness is taken as goodness,
Wickedness enters as well.

For is and is-not come together;
Hard and easy are complementary;
Long and short are relative;
High and low are comparative;
Pitch and sound make harmony;
Before and after are a sequence.

Therefore the sage:

Manages affairs without action;
 He teaches not by speech
 But by accomplishment;
 All things take their rise, but he does not turn away from them;
 He gives them life, but does not take possession of them;
 He acts, but does not appropriate;
 Accomplishes, but claims no credit.

It is because he lays claim to no credit
 That the credit cannot be taken away from him.
 (*Tao Te Ching*, 2)

Wisdom stands for - as we have seen above - global awareness, the ability to perceive and to understand all possible viewpoints without discrimination. This global awareness permits the attitude of *wu wei*. Whoever has the attitude of *wu wei* will live his life in accordance to *tao*. This is the description of the sage in Chinese thought: the sage never is something, but always changes and therefore he can be all things.

This seems to be in opposition to the western concept of the sage as we have seen above. "The sage stays identical to himself", says Pierre Hadot (Hadot, p.335), because he is indifferent to outer circumstances. He needs nothing and nobody. He is self-sufficient.

Does this mean that the Greek conception of wisdom is incompatible with the Chinese one? One of the most famous books of Chinese wisdom is called *The Book of Change*. Should we suppose that a Greek version would have been named *The Book of Being*? In reality this question is more complicated and asks for a much more thorough investigation and understanding of both Chinese and Greek thought than I am able to give here. But I would stress one thing: there may be a lot of differences and even oppositions between the Chinese and the Greek conception of the sage, but in practice those who have dedicated their lives to wisdom recognise each other. Lao Tse and Socrates could have been good pals, Confucius and Plato could have been friends, so too Chuang Tse and Marcus Aurelius.

Instead of looking from a theoretical viewpoint for identity or opposition I venture here to point at some correspondences between the Taoists, Lao Tse and Chuang Tse and the Stoic, Marcus Aurelius. To the global vision of the sage cited above in fragment 2 of Lao Tse's *Tao Te Ching* corresponds the cosmic vision of the world and of reality in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius:

"...letting your thought sweep over the entire universe, contemplating the illimitable tracts of eternity, marking the swiftness of change in each created thing, and contrasting the brief span between birth and dissolution with the endless aeons that precede the one and the infinity that follows the other." (9.33)

The sage follows the natural course of life and conforms himself to it. Marcus Aurelius tells us:

"When beset from without by circumstance, be unperturbed; when prompted from within to action, be just and fair: in fine, let both will and deed issue in behaviour that is social and fulfils the law of your being." (9.31)

We can hear the resonance of the words of Chuang Tse who says about sages:

"Naturally independent of mind, they were not severe. Living in unconstrained freedom, yet they did not try to show off. They appeared to smile as if pleased, and to move only in natural response to surroundings. Their serenity flowed from the store of goodness within. In social relationships, they kept to their inner character." (108/2:4)

The sage sees the unity of all that is and accepts change with an equanimity close to joy. Marcus Aurelius and Chuang Tse give both their own interpretation of this insight. The first one writes:

"Loss is nothing else but change, and change is Nature's delight. Ever since the world began, things have been ordered by her decree in the selfsame fashion as they are at this day, and as other similar things will be ordered to the end of time. How, then, can you say that it is all amiss, and ever will be so; that no power among all the gods in heaven can avail to mend it; and that the world lies condemned to a thralldom of ills without end?" (9.35)

The second one says:

"To have been cast in this human form is to us already a source of joy. How much greater joy beyond our conception to know that that which is now in human form may undergo countless transitions, with only the infinite to look forward to? Therefore it is that the Sage rejoices in that which can never be lost, but endures always. For if we emulate those who can accept graciously long age or short life and the vicissitudes of events, how much more that which informs all creation on which all changing phenomena depend?" (98/2:6)

Countless are the correspondences to make and the passages to cite, but it will be clear from the above how intricately related both visions of wisdom are.

Pierre Hadot observed the profound similarities between the various philosophical schools in Ancient Greek and Hellenistic culture in describing the figure of the sage and this in spite of their often profound differences and mutual oppositions. Could this be true for all cultures? In that case it is not accidental to find some aspects of Chinese wisdom in the words of Rilke, a German poet, as wisdom can be culture-bound and universal.

The sage is a universal norm and ideal, determining the way of living of whoever desires to be wise. The ideal of the sage, however, is not easily attained. It is in most cases the work of a lifetime without any guarantee of success. So where should one start? Maybe we can ask this question to one of the greatest and most peculiar wise men in Western thought, Socrates. Proclaiming that the only thing he knew was that he did not know anything, he, nevertheless, was a sage, recognised as such by all the various schools of ancient philosophy.

Socrates' advice was: know thyself! His method was the dialogue. Getting to know oneself through dialogue was the advice he never expressed, but actually showed in his living and which he practised continuously. If we look at the work and life of other sages of various parts of the world, self-knowledge seems indeed to be one of the keys to wisdom. Self-knowledge is not only knowledge of your mind, but also the awareness and the realisation of the different levels and aspects of your being. If it is impossible to train yourself in being wise, you still can work to get to know yourself better.

There are many ways and methods, philosophical, psychological and spiritual, to attain self-knowledge. Socrates chose the philosophical way by using dialogue. We can find dialogues between sages or between the sage and disciple all over the world. What happens during a dialogue? To find this out for yourself I propose the following philosophical exercise in four parts:

The first part is about what one can experience through the body when one meets another person.

- Find a partner and stand facing each other about two metres apart.
- Close your eyes. Concentrate yourself on the present moment by taking a few breaths and being aware of your body. Be sure you are firm on your feet.
- Both of you hold your hands before you, palms facing your partner. Put your concentration on the palms of your hands: they will replace your eyes.
- Check with each other whether you are ready and start to walk very, very slowly and silently towards each other, eyes kept closed and using your hands to register the presence of the other.
- At any moment one of you can ask for a halt to check the distance between the two of you or to take time to register any changes perceived with the hands or the body. After that continue until you touch the palms of your partner.
- You can now open your eyes, exchange with your partner and analyse your experience, while you ask yourself questions like: When did I perceive the other? What effect did it have? Is this communication? Am I aware of it in daily life? How does the presence of the body influence the dialogue?

The second part is the most difficult as you will see, because it is very revealing and asks confidence both in yourself and in your partner. The aim is to experience communication through the eyes.

- Sit down facing each other, close, but knees or feet not touching. Close your eyes and take a few breaths to relax and to concentrate yourself on the present moment.
- Open your eyes and look in each others eyes or, if you prefer, read each others eyes, without talking. Just register what happens.

Smiling can be the result of this exchange, a wonderful moment of recognition, but laughing is in most cases just the sign of embarrassment and prevents you from experiencing anything at all. You can try this encounter several times, for example the first time for about one minute, then a bit longer till you both are satisfied with the experience. Your exchange afterwards can focus on questions like: What did I see? Is this communication? Was there some kind of exchange as in a dialogue? Was it easier to have my attention on myself or on my partner? What did I learn about myself and about the other?

The third part is a dialogue in the literal sense of the word: communication through words. Having experienced some non-verbal levels of the dialogue, your experience of the dialogue may have changed. You could help each other to find out in how far this is the case.

- Sit down together and try to find out what is necessary to a fruitful dialogue. It may be helpful to illustrate any statements by concrete examples one of you has experienced.

It is possible to insert some moments of meta-dialogue during which you discuss the dialogue you just had. You can use the meta-dialogue, for example, to see whether, while talking or listening, you are capable of being aware of the presence of the other just as you experienced it during the first part of this exercise or, as in part two, to read each others eyes.

The last part of this exercise proposes an evaluation of the exercise and an exchange about the connection between the dialogue and self-knowledge:

- Which part of the exercise has been the most revealing? What did I learn about my partner during this exercise? And about myself? Try to be as specific as possible! Do you think that what you learned about your partner is how he or she is, or is it knowledge about how you see him or her?

Could it be that in a dialogue one learns more about oneself than about one's partner? How could that be or not be the case? Did you gain any insights about how knowing oneself can contribute to living one's questions until one is ready to live into the answers, as Rilke put it?

You can of course change and adapt this exercise to your own wishes as long as you realise that the aim of this philosophical exercise is to inspire you to question yourself in order to get to know yourself better and to take another step towards wisdom.

Life is full of opportunities to get to know oneself better. We do not need any special exercise, but sometimes an exercise can make us see parts of ourselves we had not realised before. One of the aspects I like most in the above exercise is that it makes clear that self-knowledge is not only gained through introspection. Self-knowledge through dialogue prevents me from contemplating my navel! I think this is part of the paradox of wisdom: gaining in self-knowledge by putting your attention to someone else. Just as Socrates was a sage in spite of the fact that the only thing he knew was that he did not know anything. Or the philosopher who knows that the more she looks for wisdom the farther she will get away from it.

The wise person is wise because they do not pay attention to their wisdom. It is as Rilke says: "For the moment just live your questions. Maybe little by little you will live one day, without noticing it, into the answer." The real answer to your question will come without you noticing it. It will come the moment your attention is not on finding the answer, but on living your life. Wisdom is present there where the thought of wisdom is absent. As "know thyself!" leads you to wisdom, it is "Ignore thyself!" that makes of you a sage. The best illustration I have found of this paradox is the following Zen story:

On his deathbed a Master was asked by his disciple and successor: "Master, is there anything else that I need to know?" "No", said the Master, "I am quite satisfied by and large. But there is one thing about you that still worries me." "What is it?" asked the disciple. "Please tell me so that I can set it right." "Well", said the Master, "the trouble is you still stink of Zen."

May all of you who read this be one day odourless!

References

Desjardins, A (1995) *Hsin-hsin-ming* in *Zen et Vedanta*, La Table Ronde

Hadot, P (1995) *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, folio, Gallimard

Hersch, J (1993) *L'étonnement philosophique*, folio Gallimard

Julien, F (1998) *Un sage est sans idée*, Seuil

Marcus Aurelius (1964) *Meditations*, Penguin Classics

Rilke, R.M. (1998) *Diaries of a Young Poet*, Norton

Schloegl, I (1975) *The Wisdom of the Zen Masters*, New Directions, NY

Yutang, L (1948) *The Wisdom of Laotse*, Random House