

Essential Spirituality by Roger Walsh
Practice #6: Cultivate Spiritual Intelligence: Develop Wisdom and Understand Life
Chapters 27, 28, 29, 30

OVERVIEW

[6] Cultivate spiritual intelligence: develop wisdom and understand life

Keywords: spiritual intelligence, wisdom

We can understand Practice #6 as something that takes practice #5 “a notch higher.” We don't stop at having new eyes to view the world (Practice #5). We go further on our spiritual quest and strive to **acquire wisdom** to understand more deeply the true nature and meaning of life, of humanity, of the world, of reality and live accordingly.

Sample Exercises: Commit time to silence and solitude; Practice spiritual reading; Enjoy the company of the wise

1. What is Wisdom? (Chapter 27, Page 213)

Summary:

The world is filled with information, but Wisdom is not only information. It is something more profound and geared towards practice. Wisdom should be an essential part of our lives and has been highly valued by all the great religions. Developing wisdom means in practice a greater spiritual intelligence.

Key Points from Chapter 27

1.2 What Wisdom is Not: (Page 213)

- Intelligence
 - The ability to learn, understand, and think clearly and logically. *Wisdom results from applying intelligence to understanding the central issues of life but is not intelligence alone.*
- Knowledge
 - Knowledge acquires information, wisdom requires understanding it. Knowledge is more objective than wisdom. Knowledge is informative while *wisdom is transformative*. Knowledge is expressed in words, wisdom is expressed in our lives.
- Dramatic experiences
 - Dramatic experiences, even powerful spiritual experiences, are not proof of wisdom. Spiritual experiences can be powerful, but can also be incorrect or misleading. They can lead to self-aggrandizement or spiritual materialism. It is true that deep experiences can lead to wisdom, but they must be carefully examined, tested, discussed, and used for learning and nonattachment. Wisdom can grow from an experience, but is more than the experience itself.
- Personal power

- Wisdom is more than personal power. A powerful teacher can be seductive to students who believe that power and charisma must be signs of spiritual maturity. The great religions agree that psychic powers are possible. They also agree, however, that these powers are not signs of wisdom or spiritual maturity and are infinitely less important than the goal of liberation.

1.3 Defining Wisdom: (Page 217)

- **Wisdom is deep understanding and practical skill in the central issues of life, especially existential and spiritual issues.**
- Existential issues are those crucial and universal concerns all of us face simply because we are human. They include finding meaning and purpose in our lives; managing relationships and aloneness; acknowledging our limits and smallness in a universe beyond comprehension; living in inevitable uncertainty and mystery; and dealing with sickness, suffering, and death.

1.4 Two Aspects of Wisdom: (Page 217)

Wisdom has been considered to have two distinct but interlocking elements: [1] a visionary or understanding aspect and [2] a practical or applied aspect.

1.5 Vision and Understanding (Page 217)

- The “visionary” aspect of wisdom comes from seeing deeply and clearly to recognize the deeper nature of things and life.
- This highly refined awareness is characterized by clarity, subtlety, and penetrating power.
- Penetrating power comes in large part from concentration.
- In classical Buddhism, concentration is described as the preceding or immediate cause of wisdom
- Vision provides the intuition from which understanding is born.
- The visionary aspect of wisdom sees and explores three things: [1] life, [2] mind, and [3] the nature of reality.
 - Life
 - Wisdom explores the nature of life, such as the causes of happiness and the causes of suffering. Often visionary wisdom sees that conventional ways of living are rife with suffering.
 - Mind
 - Wisdom recognizes the awesome power of the mind to both create and cloud our experience. It recognizes that the mind can be trained, tamed, transformed, and transcended, and that this is the essential means for fostering happiness, love, altruism, and liberation.
 - The nature of reality
 - Wise people see deeply into the fundamental nature of reality. There is direct personal recognition, not just theoretical knowledge, of life, the world, and the mind.

1.6 Practical or Applied Wisdom (Page 219)

- Practical wisdom is skill in living, especially in responding to the central, existential issues of life.
- At its deepest, it is living *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the aspect of eternity.

- There is an appreciating of natural law, natural ethics, and the natural lifestyle. All of which are harmonious with the fundamental nature of reality.
- Wisdom leads us to live harmoniously and compassionately with others.
- Wise people have the ability to “transcend personal agendas and turn to collective or universal issues.” This is what Buddhism refers to as the union of wisdom and compassion, because wisdom naturally finds expression in service to others.

2. Awakening Wisdom (Chapter 28, Page 221)

Summary:

Where do we go to acquire wisdom, to become “authentically wise”? One possible way is to turn to the spiritual heart of the great religious traditions which holds the accumulated wisdom of thousands of years and thousands of sages. Some important keys to wisdom lie there.

Key Points from Chapter 28

2.1 Preparing for Wisdom (Page 221)

- Refining motivation relinquishing attachments allow wiser choices (practice #1) Ethical living (practice #3) and transforming emotions reduce the clouding effects of anger, guilt and fear (practice #2).

2.2 The Wisdom of Ignorance (Page 222)

- Wisdom is born of paradox. If we would be wise, we must first recognize that we are not.
- [jkk] Remember the famous quote: “**What I know is that I know nothing**”. It is a saying derived from Plato's account of the Greek philosopher Socrates: “*For I was conscious that I knew practically nothing...*” (Plato, Apology 22d, translated by Harold North Fowler, 1966)
- The universe is so incomprehensibly vast, life so inconceivably profound, and our minds so relatively limited that our lives and the universe are a great and wondrous mystery.
- Recognizing our ignorance in the face of this mystery is an accurate reflection of our human condition. [jkk] Recognizing the limits of one’s knowledge (technically known as “Epistemological Humility”) is a sure mark of integrity!

2.3 Sources of Wisdom (Page 224)

- Wisdom is found everywhere, but many spiritual traditions advise us to seek wisdom in:
 - Nature
 - In silence and solitude
 - From the wise
 - In ourselves (self-knowledge). [jkk] To accomplish this, one needs to cultivate “depth” in oneself (That is the opposite of a superficial mindset).
 - From reflecting on the nature of life and death

2.4 Nature: Birthplace of the Sacred (Page 224)

- Spiritual seekers of the world recognize the trap of losing our hearts in the hustle and bustle of daily life ([jkk] especially in our chaotic urban settings) and recommend nature as a healing antidote. [jkk] E.g., Note the Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku* (Japanese: 森林浴 forest bathing)

- Nature sensitizes us to the sacred and is a superb setting for self-discovery and the birth of wisdom.

2.5 Silence and Solitude (Page 225)

- The spiritual power of nature or any situation can be further enriched by silence and solitude.
- Solitude is *different* from loneliness, it is a deliberate choice to take time alone in order to foster and enjoy serenity, sensitivity, and the other benefits that ensue.
- Religions and modern psychologists believe that periods of solitude foster reflection and refreshment and can even enhance creativity and physical health.

2.6 The Wise / the Sages / the Wisdom-Questers (Page 227)

- Wisdom can flower in people at all times and learning from others is a way to cultivate wisdom.
- Studying the lives of wise people (e.g., the Dalai Lama) is to learn from their example; to meet them is to be inspired by their presence; to hear or read their words is to drink from their mouths.
- There are many degrees of wisdom and finding others who are a few steps ahead can help.
- Friendships that are made out of a shared love of the sacred, can be unique in their depth, honesty, and love.

2.7 Know Your Self (Self-knowledge) (Page 228)

- As spiritual practice deepens, we gradually awaken to a startling realization: we do not really know ourselves.
- Self-knowledge is made up of three levels: outer, inner, and deep.
 - To know our outer self is to know the self and mask we show to the world: our surface emotions, habits, and personality. This is the self that is visible to everyone.
 - To know our inner self is visible to only ourselves. It requires that we consciously look inward, that we cultivate “depth”. It can also refer to our secret hopes and fears and fantasies. These are hidden from others and partially hidden from ourselves.
 - Our deep self is our true self: The Atman, Buddha nature or *Imago Dei* that is the goal of spiritual practice.
- Turning attention inward allows us to know ourselves and recognize that we are far more than we believed ourselves to be.

2.8 Learning to Know Your Self (Page 228)

- There are three techniques especially important:
 - Meditation
 - Studying oneself
 - Careful attention to what you say and do, habits, relationships, strengths, and weaknesses. It becomes a schoolhouse for the soul.
 - Self-acceptance
 - Self-acceptance means relinquishing self-attack and condemnation.
 - It can be healing.
 - It is a middle way between inflated pride and self-loathing. To see ourselves as we are, without exaggerating either our virtues or our failings.

3. Practical Exercises in Wisdom (Chapter 29, Page 232)

Summary:

Some specific exercises to cultivate wisdom.

3.1 Exercise 1: Commit time to silence and solitude. (Page 232)

- It is challenging to find uninterrupted time for silence and solitude.
- The Jewish Torah points out that Wisdom depends on the “opportunity of leisure,” saying, “Only the one with little business can be wise.” [jkk] What this implies is, no matter how busy we are, we have to find the time to stop everything else and devote ourselves to the acquiring of wisdom.
- It is valuable to commit to quiet time alone for a few minutes each day or an hour a week.
- Begin by consciously dedicating the time to your healing or awakening.
- If there is a particular question or concern you want to focus on, by all means do so.
- The time is best spent in quiet reflection, mixed with meditation or prayer.

3.2 Exercise 2: Reflect on “The Four Mind-Changers” (Page 233)

- To develop wisdom and motivation to inspire practice, one can reflect on the “four mind-changers.”
 - These ideas are known as "the four mind-changers" because they help us understand the nature of life and change our minds and lives accordingly.
- They are reflections on (these echo Buddhism’s “the five remembrances”)
 - Life is inconceivably precious.
 - Life is short and death is certain.
 - Life contains inevitable difficulties.
 - Our ethical choices mold our lives.
- Life is inconceivably precious
 - Especially those blessed with what Tibetans call “free and well-favored lives.”
 - Those with the physical and mental ability to cultivate spiritual practice is a special opportunity.
 - Our challenge is to make optimum use of this priceless opportunity, not to be seduced by petty obsessions and trivial goals, but rather to seek the greatest of all goals: our awakening and the awakening and welfare of others.
- Life is short and death is certain.
 - Death comes to everyone.
 - Many of the great religions emphasize this fact to inspire us to remember and prioritize what is truly meaningful in our short lives.
 - This is why a brush with death can be so life-transforming; it strips away our denial of mortality and shocks us into reassessing our lives.
- Life contains inevitable difficulties.
 - Life is short and difficult.
 - Suffering is inherent in the human condition.
 - None of us escapes life unscathed. It is crucial to recognize this and not gloss over the inevitable difficulties of life, because "If a way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst" (Thomas Hardy)
- Our ethical choices mold our lives.
 - All that we say, do, or think affects our lives and creates consequences that haunt or help us.
 - Ethical living is absolutely essential to well-being.

- As the Buddha said: “Wherever we go, wherever we remain, the results of our actions follow us.”

3.3 Exercise 3: Spiritual Reading **(Page 236)**

- This exercise involves reading and reflecting on spiritual writing.
- By reading and reflecting on the words of the wise, their ideas and perspectives gradually become part of us or even our very own.
- Choose some writings that resonate with you, either ancient sacred text or modern sage.
- Read from your selection slowly and reflectively, allowing the words to sink into your depths.
- If related thoughts arise, explore them and accept them.
- Return to reading if the thoughts become irrelevant.
- Done this way, sacred reading merges into meditation and prayer.

3.4 Exercise 4: Recognize your teachers and their gifts. **(Page 237)**

- Reflect on the people who have been your greatest teachers in life (family friends, coaches etc.)
- As you remember them, write their names down and list the special qualities that made these people so helpful and the lessons you learned from them.
- Then reflect on the qualities in you that made you receptive to their wisdom.
- Finally, allow feelings of gratitude and appreciation for these teachers to emerge.
- You can even express these feelings to them at some point, as to express gratitude is to strengthen it.

3.5 Exercise 5: Enjoy the company of the wise **(Page 237)**

- Make a list of people who you know personally and seem wise or who want to learn and become wise.
- Consider how you could spend more time with them.
- Choose an approach (visit them? Invite them over? Start a book club? etc.) and begin.

3.6 Exercise 6: Discover your philosophy of life **(Page 237)**

- Gandhi, like many of the great saints, believed that his life was his message.
- Each of us has developed and lived by a philosophy of life. Sometimes, it is unconscious.
- Discover your own guiding philosophy by first relaxing and closing your eyes. When you feel calm, gently ask “in approximately three words, what is my philosophy of life?”
- Allow the response to emerge from the depths of your mind.
- These answers will become some of the deepest principles guiding your life.

3.7 Exercise 7: Review your life **(Page 238)**

- Periodically reviewing your life is beneficial because it allows us to learn from our experiences and mistakes.
- This pondering is best done in the spirit of gentle inquiry aimed at understanding and accepting, rather than judging and condemning oneself.
- The goal of self-inquiry and self-examination is to learn not to blame, to grow in wisdom, and appreciate our strengths and recognize our weaknesses.

3.8 Exercise 8: Corrective Visualization (**Page 240**)

- To heal any destructive emotions or habits that caused mistakes, you can use corrective visualization.
- You visualize yourself handling the situation that occurred more skillfully.
- You begin with relaxing and visualizing a time where you spoke or acted in a way you now regret.
- As you watch yourself, see the error you made and the consequences.
- Then restart the visualization from the beginning, but instead this time imagine making a wiser choice and how it made you feel to do so.
- A few minutes of this exercise can bring a sense of healing, offer new insights, and help establish healthy new habits.

3.9 Exercise 9: Contact your inner teacher (**Page 241**)

- The great religions assure us that wisdom already resides within us.
- Learning how to access this inner wisdom will guide and help you.
- Close your eyes and relax.
- Imagine yourself in a beautiful place and enjoy the feelings that this place evokes.
- Invite into this place a wise person, either someone you know or even someone unknown. What matters is they embody qualities such as great wisdom, love, and acceptance.
- Introduce yourself to this wise person and reflect what it feels like to be around them.
- Take a moment to think about questions you want to ask and ask them.
- Then ask the wise person if they have anything to tell you or any questions for you.
- Finally ask if the wise person will be available to you in the future and express thanks.
- Then image merging with this wise person, absorb the qualities of this person.
- After slowly open your eyes and transition slowly back into awareness.

4. The Higher Reaches of Wisdom (**Chapter 30, Page 243**)

Summary:

In addition to the visionary and practical wisdom recognized by philosophers, there is a more profound transcendental wisdom that gradually illuminates spiritual practitioners. The challenge is to incorporate these insights into an even wider, deeper, and more comprehensive understanding of mind, self, and reality. We can trace the major insights and challenges of practitioners as they move through the three major stages: subtle, pure consciousness, and nondual.

Key Points from Chapter 30

4.1 Subtle Wisdom (**Page 243**)

- As awareness becomes more lucid, it penetrates into the subtle depths of the psyche, below the usual conscious mind.
- The practitioner uncovers transpersonal forces that are initially faint and subtle, but have transformative power (archetypal images, sacred visions, and emotions like boundless love/compassion.)

- The central insight of subtle wisdom is that the psyche is multilayered and that within its depths are powerful transpersonal forces that must be appropriately experienced, integrated, and expressed.

4.2 The Wisdom of Pure Consciousness (Page 244)

- As awareness becomes more penetrating it breaks into the realm of pure consciousness, mind, or spirit.
- There are no objects, thoughts, or things, no time or change, no minds to suffer or bodies to decay and die.
- There is only the bliss of unbounded awareness.
- Exclusive identification with the body and mind is gone.
- The key insight of this level of wisdom is that a sacred realm of pure awareness is our true nature and our home, and that by awakening to it, suffering can be transcended, and divine bliss directly known..

4.3 Nondual Wisdom (Page 245)

- At the level of pure consciousness, the practitioner can experience either the world or the transcendent realm of awareness, but not both simultaneously.
- Inner and outer objects return, but they are seen as expressions or projections of consciousness.
- “All things become nothing but God.”
- This is the recognition of nonduality, the utter inseparability of spirit and matter, of mind and manifestation, of inner and outer, personal and transpersonal, sacred and profane, Self and God.

4.4 Who Chants the Name of Buddha? (Page 246)

- If all things are experienced as inseparable aspects of the divine, that means that the ‘self’ *is also* an aspect of the divine!
- The sense of one’s self as an ego --a “self”)limited to the body, forever separate from all things--dissolves in the blazing light of divine consciousness or awareness, to be replaced with a recognition of oneself, and everyone and everything, as aspects of the divine, as parts of “the One”. This is a common spiritual experience in all spiritual traditions.
- There is no longer a separate ego looking out at a material world, but only “God looking at God”.
 - consciousness observing its manifestations, the Buddha aware of Buddha nature
- It is not blasphemy against God, but rather it is awareness that there is only God (all life lives in and are lived by the Divine.)
- The sage delights in ego transcendence.

4.5 The Liberating Power of Wisdom (Page 248)

- Transcendental wisdom has many levels and many names across all the great religions.
 - *hokmah* (Judaism)
 - *prajna* (Buddhism)
 - *jnana* (Hin-duism)
 - *mar’ifah* (Islam)
 - *gnosis* (Christianity)
- Seeing the way we and reality really are, corrects the false beliefs and delusions that lock us into our self-defeating sense of self and ways of being.
- Wisdom is a spiritual capacity of enormous liberating power.

- Wisdom dissolves our mental prison, reduces our suffering, and speeds our awakening.
- By loosening the bonds of egoism, wisdom also fosters concern and compassion for others.
