

PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Special Double Issue

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Using Leisure to Improve Lives—Epictetus, Seneca and Indian Philosophy

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Covid-19 is playing many tricks with the minds of people. It is bringing along with it negativity, anxiety, anger, etc among the entire global population. These are not pleasant times. There is a lot of uncertainty, stress for all and also actual losses for many, losing people or losing jobs. All of us are working from home now, and that has opened up some amount of free time due to the constraints of having to stay in one place.

However the ancient philosophers would look at it very differently. Let us learn from them how to make best use of this difficult time.

This kind of leisure is seen by philosophers as a gift. It allows us time to examine our lives. Socrates, considered the greatest philosopher of the ancient Greek world says that the unexamined life is not worth living. The Stoics advocated leisure to the point of making leisure a choice for one's activity. Indian philosophers proposed 'Vanaprasthashram' as a period of life, important for self-development, before trying to achieve spiritual development.

Stoic Ethics

For the Stoics, wisdom and virtue are of utmost importance. Wisdom is about knowing what is right, which flows from understanding various ethical principles. Virtue is when you put these principles in action. Implementing wisdom is the act of virtue. So developing the habit of acting virtuously requires leisure. We need the time and peace to try out the ethical principles. It is like a lab-work for contemplation and checking to see if we are acting correctly as per our principles. Leisure also gives us time to reflect, time to take a step back and examine our motives for our actions. For example, in a corporate retreat at some nature spot far from the city, the mission and vision for the company is revised; here we do the brainstorming with ourselves, to examine our own thoughts and actions, our own mission and vision for our future.

All our actions are based on our beliefs. If we believe that lockdown is unacceptable, we will step out of the house and continue our usual activities. If we believe that there is a good chance that we will be affected by the virus, we will naturally take care of ourselves, our mind and body. If we think that there is a very concrete chance that the virus is going to get to us, we will be anxious. We may not be aware at times of what we believe in, whether our beliefs are correct or incorrect, but our actions will reveal them to us. So if we start wondering why we are so anxious, we need to go back and check on our belief system. For that, we require leisure and detachment for conducting rational analysis.

The ancient Stoic philosopher Epictetus encouraged leisure and showed its importance and value to be higher than pleasure. Imagine time spent in doing pleasurable activities when time passes

very quickly and pleasantly. But the overall effect of pleasure on one's life seems very wasteful, as it does not give us anything lasting, any guidance for life or any lesson learnt. We miss the time spent in pleasurable activities, because the rest of the life starts to seem very dry and desolate. Pleasure makes us think that life is meant for such activities as an end in themselves, whereas leisure helps one be creative, focussed on one's goals, give us time to reflect upon life and carve a better path forward. Leisure gives us time to explore our inner talent, observe our behaviour, examine our irrational thoughts, whereas pleasure drowns us in some fun activity, not allowing us to move up or move on. So Epictetus asks us to guard ourselves against pleasure in the following passage.

34. If you are struck by the appearance of any promised pleasure, guard yourself against being hurried away by it; but let the affair wait your leisure, and procure yourself some delay. Then bring to your mind both points of time: that in which you will enjoy the pleasure, and that in which you will repent and reproach yourself after you have enjoyed it; and set before you, in opposition to these, how you will be glad and applaud yourself if you abstain. And even though it should appear to you a seasonable gratification, take heed that its enticing, and agreeable and attractive force may not subdue you; but set in opposition to this how much better it is to be conscious of having gained so great a victory.¹

In other words, indulging in a plate of chocolate chip cookies may give us a momentary distraction from worries, but strategizing about how to improve a certain action plan would make life easier.

Another ancient Stoic thinker Seneca mentions that leisure allows one to make time for Philosophy, which is the source of life, a fountain of youth, that helps us spend one's time effectively and understand the true meaning of life. Stoic Seneca describes this thought in his beautiful prose:

Of all people only those are at leisure who make time for philosophy, only those are really alive. For they not only keep a good watch over their own lifetimes, but they annex every age to theirs. All the years that have passed before them are added to their own. Unless we are very ungrateful, all those distinguished founders of holy creeds were born for us and prepared for us a way of life.²

In other words, we already have a roadmap of how to conduct ourselves from the ancient philosophers, and if we follow that with gratitude, we may not need reinvent the wheels.

Hindu Ethics

When leisure is not forced upon us like it is right now under lockdown, it comes naturally to most people after retirement. In the Indian tradition, Vanaprasthashram was meant to do just that - to give people time to detach themselves from their household and worldly responsibilities and start focusing on their spiritual development to get ready for the 'Sannyasashram'. This period of Vanaprasthashram was a chance to be focussed on reflection, contemplation and some serious analysis of where one's life is going, assessing if one had understood the meaning of one's life, to check if we had generated enough good karma to take to the next life and if there was a big shortfall in what we should have achieved in this life: leisure gives one a chance to fix that deficit by doing good karma or good deeds which generate 'punya' or virtue.

According to the theory of Ashramas, a human life was divided in four quarters. The first quarter was that of childhood, the second of married life with its responsibilities, the third comprised retired life and the fourth was devoted to the pursuit of the spiritual. The third quarter of life was known as ‘Vanaprastha Ashram,’³ roughly translated as the process of going into the forest, but not actually living in a forest—which is what they would do in the fourth quarter. The third ashrama taught people to detach themselves from their responsibilities as householders, whether it was raising kids, looking after the elders, earning money, running the household—all of that would need to slowly and surely yield to the pursuit of moral and eventually spiritual life. This categorisation assumed that the human life spanned over a hundred years and each of these lasted twenty-five years—no more no less.

Letting go of duties created a sense of leisure, which was again very useful for developing virtues and moral life. In Indian philosophy morality is projected as but a shadow of spirituality. Morality cannot be completely achieved without the support of spirituality. So in order to continue on the path of spirituality, it was important to first rationally assess the moral depth of one’s development. Once the moral quotient increased, it became easier to release the sense of rationality to move towards meditation and Bhakti.

Message Underlined

The underlined message in both these traditions and their ethical views is that it is possible to use leisure to turn one’s life around to the point that we become more mindful, more aware of one’s actions. It allows us to analyze our own motives and actions, review our chances of moral success and improve our chances of happiness in life. The stoics would say that the wisdom and practice of virtue automatically results in happiness. When one knows that one is doing the right thing for humanity, we sleep better, are peaceful, and have no qualms about future. When we are worried about being misunderstood, we are aware that we may have somehow caused a ruckus by saying something unwise or doing something immoral, even if it is only a tad grey and not a completely black and white description.

Likewise Indian philosophy talks about first studying the scriptures, then raising a family and participating in worldly affairs, then slowly renouncing it. It requires leisure to learn to detach oneself from the small and big things that we are attached to in our daily lives. What this imposed stay-home leisure is doing to us in the short run is giving us a chance to reflect on life, be creative and resourceful about how we would like to change our lives. Whether we get a new degree of some kind in this short amount of time is not so important. But if we learn to reflect, introspect, contemplate and assess our own past actions and revise our strategies for future, the leisure would have still served its purpose and be the most wonderful gift that nature could have bestowed on those of us who have had the good fortune to survive the coronavirus and the pandemic period.

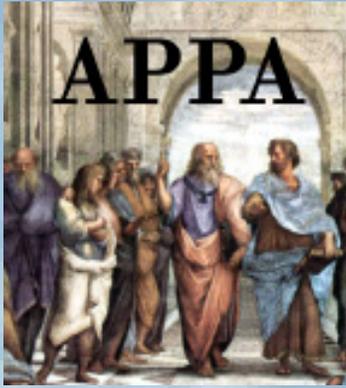
Notes

1. <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html>
2. https://www.academia.edu/32808779/_Seneca_On_the_Shortness_of_Life_Penguin_Great_I_BookZZ.org, page 23
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanaprastha>

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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

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The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

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