

What Is the Wisdom Tradition?

by Alan Krema / Originally published in Spirit Journal February 2017

In our ongoing Saturday Living Wisdom workshops, it is clear that some of our group are familiar with the notion of Wisdom as an embodied spiritual practice and also that many are curious but not familiar with the people and practices that we refer to as coming from the Wisdom tradition. So, I offered to write a brief overview to create a context for what we mean by Wisdom.

As a starting point, consider these two excerpts from [The Wisdom Way of Knowing](#) by Cynthia Bourgeault:

Wisdom is an ancient tradition, a precise lineage of spiritual knowledge, not a particular religious expression, but arising from the headwaters of all the great sacred paths. From time immemorial there have been Wisdom schools, places where men and women have been raised to a higher level of understanding, partly by enlightened human beings and partly by direct guidance from above. Wisdom has flowed from a great underground stream from these schools, providing guidance and nurturance, as well as occasional sharp course corrections, to the flow of human history. – p.4



Jesus was known to his disciples as a Wisdom teacher – a “Master of Wisdom.” He taught a method of transformation that was both ancient and timeless. The teaching he brought and embodied conforms itself to the vessel of Wisdom as had been known to the ancients of history. – p.13.

In the early Christian times there developed a way of living expressed by the teachings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. They formed a combination of hermit and community lifestyles that included a deep desire to live the way Jesus lived and taught. This movement was in some way a reaction to the Church becoming a social and political institution focused on external practice and belief.

For the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the notion was to live in a way that developed each person as a whole, bringing body, mind, and spirit into finely tuned alignment. Theirs was a very embodied lifestyle, i.e., much was taught in terms of the body. All was intended to be in balance, not in extremes. Food was a means of living. Extreme fasting was discouraged because, as an end in itself, it creates distractions to prayer. So does gluttony create a false sense of imbalance. There is much to learn from this tradition about prayer and the opening of the self to the deeper and higher notions of being. I hope in the future the Living Wisdom program will be able to spend an entire workshop day or retreat on the theme of the Desert Abbas and Ammas.

From the long traditions of the monastic desert communities, the Benedictine Rule (circa 500 a.d.) arose as a scripted framework for living a life of Wisdom. It is the oldest working rule for living in Western history. More than the details of living a monastic life in the 6th century, the rule provides us a meta template for living. The daily Benedictine rhythm of *ora et labora* fundamentally divides our activity into four parts or quadrants: to pray, to pray in community, to work, and to work in community.

In this context, the method of Centering Prayer taught by Thomas Keating and his Benedictine community can be looked at as a method for one-fourth of the daily activity we are called to. In addition to private prayer practice, we can experience group prayer, work as conscious labor, and our work in groups as means of enhancing awareness of the divine indwelling, in alignment with others. This Benedictine calling of *ora et labora* is another theme I hope we will be able to spend time developing as the Living Wisdom program continues.

The overarching mode-of-being that is derived from these traditions is one of wholeness. We are driven to be complete and whole. Our body should be in alignment with our mind and our mind should serve our sense of higher and deeper meaning. When we come to have this motivation as a basic human need, we see all manner of spiritual expression, especially in our religious heritage, as means to depth and meaning.

In this brief article, I won't have time to spend on the many Christian mystics over the centuries who embodied, in an individual expression, living Wisdom as a complete and whole human being. Certainly St. Francis of Assisi was aligned with the Wisdom tradition in the sense of focus not only on spirit but on living in moderation and balance with the body and the natural world.

In the modern era, which is the last 600 – 700 years, we have lost touch with Wisdom as we have grown into individualistic notions of mental activity and attachments. The separation of religion and science has not served us well, since any notion of separateness detracts us from being whole. I loved science since I was a boy and I have loved the Christian culture I was raised up in. I had a career as a biologist and as a biomedical engineer and have always been filled with the joy of awe and wonder at the hands of science discovery. My appreciation of creation is made far greater and deeper by the vision of science.

In order to bring Wisdom into our lives and our times, we need to include all that we know and how we live in today's world. All that we know about our cosmos being an ever expanding and changing process; all that we know about our makeup as psychological beings; all that we know about the science of the heart and our neurological alignment; all that we know about our connectedness in human society and the planet we live on. All this knowledge has to take its place in the wholeness of our lives. We are called to live a contemplative or whole life but for most of us this does not include a monastic lifestyle.

The “Modern Patriarch of Wisdom,” the most important figure in the recovery of Wisdom in modern times, is George I. Gurdjieff (1866? – 1949). Born in Russian controlled Armenia, he undertook a 20 year journey through Egypt, the Near East, and Central Asia, finding

sources of ancient Wisdom and developing his form of the practice. He returned to St. Petersburg just prior to WW1 and began teaching what he called “the Work” to a small group of students. His innovative teaching involved cosmology, sacred movement, and practical work.

Here is another excerpt from The Wisdom Way of Knowing:

The Work, as Gurdjieff’s teachings are known, still continues around the world, although the format in which it is presented – highly intellectualized and somewhat secretive – is not to everyone’s taste. Its real influence has been subtle, more at the level of a quiet tilling of the ground of modern cultural consciousness until the emergence in our time of genuine Wisdom teaching and teachers...the real source of Wisdom lies in a higher or more vivid realm of divine consciousness that is neither behind us or ahead of us but as always surrounding us. And time works differently in this realm. Original doesn’t mean first in time, it means closest to the origin. What is genuinely original in this spiritual sense of being intimately connected to the Source – makes itself present in time not by the passage of linear time but by the principle of synchronicity: meaningful patterns of consciousness. – pp.23-25

It is not everyone’s calling to enter into a path of esoteric practice. But we are all called to become conscious as the created beings we are. This means we pursue our desires for wholeness, completeness, spiritual depth, and openness to our divine indwelling.

The Work provides some helpful tools for us to align our awareness and consciousness with our True Self: our inner being that is patterned in the created world of our lives. In the Gurdjieff Work, we are three-centered beings. The intellectual center (mind), the moving center (body), and the emotional center (heart). Each center has its own intelligence and all three need to be working in balance for us to be whole and complete.

Paying full attention to our body, heart, and mind is real Work for us. Because we are so very enculturated to allow our mind to dominate and to “figure everything out,” we miss big indicators of reality gained from our body awareness and the spacious connected awareness of our hearts. When we are able to use our mind to serve our heart and to move about in our daily lives in a deep and loving awareness, we will feel whole and complete. Again, we hope to develop more workshop days and retreats focusing on conscious labor, movements, and heart awareness.

The following is a sample of Wisdom practice taken from the Wisdom School Community facebook page. Notice the invitation to be aware of body, heart, and mind. This is a regular feature of the group, known as “Inner Task Fridays.” This particular post was written by Jeanine Siler Jones.

(Notice Jeanine’s use of words such as “sensed spaciousness” and “continuum of spaciousness” in an attempt to describe inner states of openness and space. Also, her description of constriction and release are very similar to the surrender we participate in

during centering prayer. Here, she is using the sensation to notice participation in daily living experience.)

This week, I have been playing with the felt sense of spaciousness, being aware of my own “awareness of spaciousness.” I have noticed myself in different interior states, from an open, spacious, released inner state to a more constricted, agitated, sense of self.

The Welcome practice (see Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening chapter 13) opens the door to sensation, deeper than my narrative self. It helps me become more familiar with what is happening right now, and allow it. The Welcome practice invites me to notice and surrender the experience I am having that can at times hook my sense of threat around security, esteem or power.

Remember, every emotion can be felt as the energy of sensation. I invite you, once again, to notice or track your body, your physiology, with curiosity and compassion, as you fluctuate along your own continuum of spaciousness.

As a practice, I offer a body prayer from my first Wisdom School that is helping me sense into the gravity at the center of my own being. The words are: “At the Stillpoint of the turning world, there I will know as I am known”. Begin by finding your feet and your own grounded presence. Lifting your right hand up to the heavens with an open palm, and your left hand down and intending toward the ground, slowly pivot on the ball of your right foot, keeping your right foot stable (the still point), as you circle around with your left foot.

Say or chant the words as you slowly turn: “At the Stillpoint of the turning world, there I will know as I am known”.

Notice what happens. See if you can sense into both the inside of you and the outside of you as one whole experience. See if you can know more about your own continuum of spaciousness...as you turn.