

***An Exploration of Wisdom***  
**Jason Merchev Interviews**  
**Wes Nisker and Copthorne Macdonald**  
**(Probable Date 2006)**

Wisdom is the heart of the enterprise *Values of the Wise*, so I look forward to today's discussion here on *Values and Ethics: from Living Room to Boardroom*. Wisdom is an apparently simple, yet surprisingly elusive matter, so I'm geared up to interview two capable and conversant individuals who can speak with me and help us all understand wisdom a bit better.

First I have Wes Nisker on the program; he goes by "Scoop." Usually I call the guest by their first name, with permission, of course; however, today I will see if I can call Wes, Scoop! He is an author of a best-selling book called the *Essential Crazy Wisdom*, an underground classic. He's also a radio commentator, Buddhist meditation teacher, and performer.

*Do what you will, this life's a fiction/ And is made up of contradiction.* –  
William Blake

I read Nisker's concise book, *the Essential Crazy Wisdom* about a year ago, and I found it very...intriguing; the text is not crammed onto the page and there is a nice smattering of poetry and quotations. It's just a remarkable take on wisdom. I would encourage you to pick it up, or at least read about it online. Hi, Scoop – that's what I should call you?

WN: Sure, call me Scoop.

Alright! Yah, I was introduced to your book *the Essential Crazy Wisdom*; I definitely incorporated some of it into my quotation database. It's got a lot of content in their that one would never find in something like *Bartlett's Quotations* under the term "wisdom."

WN: (chuckles) Right, right!

...but a useful addition to the field. Tell me how you began to think that there's something about wisdom that's "crazy," in a way.

WN: Well, I didn't actually come up with the term "crazy wisdom;" it's an idea that has been used in both Tibetan and Zen Buddhism to refer to a an understanding that *seems* crazy to the outside world, but that is actually perfectly sane upon closer examination. In fact, you might say that those who don't have crazy wisdom don't have wisdom. Crazy wisdom is not conventional wisdom.

Okay, help us understand the difference between "conventional wisdom" and what I imagine you would consider to be a deeper perspective on wisdom.

WN: I think maybe you can understand it in the sense that I define wisdom: as actually equal to humility. *Deep wisdom* is the acknowledgment that we don't know what's going on. We can claim to know this or that; we can think we do; we can put out theories and invent stories about what we're doing here, where we came from, where were going— but, at the bottom, *we don't know*.

Anyone who can admit that has found the beginning of wisdom. Then, you start out with a kind of humility, a sense of wonder, and mystery. Everything takes on a whole other shine when you say, "I don't know."

That's sort of the ground of Zen Buddhism, which has sometimes been talked about as "beginner's mind" – the mind that isn't already certain about what it knows and convinced of its truth. That's a flexible, open and exciting place to be! So that defines what I mean by crazy wisdom— that kind of "I don't know what's going on," which leads to a kind of awe and wonder about the nature of things. Lily Tomlin, in one of

her shows, had a great line: “At the moment you are most in awe of all there is about life that you don’t understand, you are closer to understanding it than at any other time.”

Hmmm. Well, I’m interested in many of the quotations that you have in your book because I think a quotation is a wonderful way to illustrate something that you’re trying to describe or impart. I think you would agree that this is in line with where you’re going with it, when Albert Einstein wrote: “Whoever undertakes to set himself up as judge in the field of truth and knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods.”

WN: (laughs) Yes, yes! He got shipwrecked himself! There were parts of his theory that came to be disproven and that he himself couldn’t eventually accept.

Yah, if I remember correctly, he held on tightly to many of his ideas as he was attempting to come up with a way to reconcile them with the truth of the universe, and I guess never really got there. Perhaps he wasn’t reflecting humility...

WN: Yah, although I think he had a deep, deep wisdom and I think he probably, at bottom, really understood that it was fine for him to make a big mistake!

Then you have someone like Frederick Nietzsche, who I think of as being a very intelligent and deep-thinking person, and your book points out that the following was inscribed over the door to his house: *I live in my own place and have never copied nobody, even half; and at any master who lacks the grace to laugh at himself, I laugh.*

WN: Yah, that comes out of that humility of “I don’t know.” It’s that kind of laughter— it’s that shrug of the shoulders. It’s that great Charlie Chaplin, you know, bopping off into the sunset after all of the disasters

he's been through, and, okay, brush yourself off – but you don't really know what's going on.

Let me ask you this: I'm not too familiar with either Buddhism or meditation, but I'm under the impression that there is a certain confidence that those who meditate describe – confident that there is this deeper level, and when you reach that, this is what is going on; confident that there is a “oneness” out there. How does that mesh with your perspective of humility?

WN: Yah, a confidence grows through meditation; it's really an investigation of your own mind and body; it's an up close and personal look at the human condition as it exists inside of you. One of the most shocking things to people who start meditating is how out of control their mind is— how much their mind seems to have a mind of its own. And as you investigate yourself, you lose the sense that you are in charge of it all and that you own this being that you call yourself. You begin to learn how thoroughly conditioned it is by the past— both by your upbringing (your psychological conditioning) – and our collective past (your conditioning as a basic mammal, one might say). You really become intimate with that as you investigate yourself. And then, that whole sense of *you/I/me/mine/individual/a being in a very firm boundary between you and the outside world* begins to shatter, and you actually begin to feel very “light in the world” and not separate, and not so fearful, and not so aggressive. It's quite an amazing process – and it's a lifelong process; you don't “get there;” you don't get to a place where you live happily ever after, you know?

But you can, through the process of meditation, really transform the way you understand yourself and the world, and you gain confidence – not in that you land on some point of view or that you suddenly have an ideology that is certain – it's more about your experience of yourself, how you feel in the world. That's what really gets altered; there is a kind of confidence in what you're feeling is not *truth*, but is...*ease*.

That's what the Buddha was pointing to; he said: I teach one thing, and one thing only – I teach about suffering, and the end of suffering. I teach about the causes of suffering and how to transform them. And he said the causes of suffering are all inside our minds – all the past life that came before it, these powerful instincts. And the Buddha understood that you could actually train that mind and learn to live with more ease and grace.

Are there writings from the Buddha that are more reliable than writings that you would find in the Bible, as far as the number of people who have touched it; the number of people who have translated it; the number of kings who have changed it?

WN: (laughs) Well, the Buddha's discourses weren't written down and tell 300-400 years after his death; they were preserved through the oral tradition and were memorized by the monks, his followers. I think they are pretty reliable. But, it isn't like something that you asks to believe in any way; it's not a theocratic religion with a God that you pray to or stories that you must believe in because they reveal some miracle or divine existence. The Buddha said, in fact, Don't believe anything I say – that you have to sit down and do your own investigation of yourself. That's the only thing that's gonna work, that's gonna liberate you from your own ego, aggression, and desires. These are the techniques I used, he says; go and do it for yourself. I think of it as a kind of psycho-spiritual system that he came up with.

OK. Well let's take a break. Before we do, say a little bit about your other books; one of them is called *The Big Bang, the Buddha & the Baby-Boom*.

WN: Right, it's part memoir of myself and the spiritual search of my generation. Starting with the beatniks in the 50s, and then in the 60s the boomers went to Asia to study these religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism was a pilgrimage. It was a pilgrimage and it was maybe of historic

proportions. Now you look around in the West and you see the Asian religions taking hold, and the practices – the meditations, the Tai Chi’s, fung sheui. This is new; we were the first generation.

Is it also true that you do a monologue called *Be Here, Wow!*

WN: Yes, I do. I’m a performer. It’s dharma teachings with a lot of jokes and humor and I hope, inspiration.

That sounds good. Is it on DVD?

WN: Actually, it’s being filmed this month, but I do have a CD of it. People can go to my website if they want a copy of it. It’s [www.wnisker.com](http://www.wnisker.com)

Thanks, Scoop. I urge the reader to check out that book that I have that is really pretty neat – and with great endorsements, too: Daniel Goleman, Gary Snyder, *Utne Reader*, etc.

WN: Yes, thank you. Many blessings to you and your listeners. Bye...

Let’s have a commercial, and when we return, I’ll be speaking with Cophorne MacDonald, on Values and Ethics: from Living Room to Boardroom, on World Talk Radio.

Twenty-five years ago, **Cophorne MacDonald**, a corporate engineer, believed the technology had all the answers, but then he began to reconsider. He took a 13-month backpack trip to the far reaches of the planet, which open his eyes. He got involved in the alternative movement in the 70s, and a meditation retreat, where he began to search inwardly. This inner adventure M to see that the key both to living a joyous life and dealing with planetary concerns is that makes of perspectives and values called *wisdom*. He lives in Canada and has a very popular website named

*The Wisdom Page*. He's a remarkable man and has a lot to say— his books are very quotable and deep, in a way. He's also very approachable and friendly.

When you search on “wisdom” on Google, there it is right near the top. It's very simple, yet has a lot of information on it. It's described a compilation of wisdom-related resources, various online texts concerning wisdom, references to books about wisdom, information about organizations that promote wisdom, wise activities, listserv groups concerned with aspects of wisdom.

Wisdom is not terribly easily understood, nor particularly popular. That is part of the reason why I'm eager to speak with Cop, as he prefers to be called, because there aren't a lot of experts on wisdom out there – and he is one. So I am happy to welcome Copthorne MacDonald. Hi Cop.

CM: Hello, Jason!

Whatever happened to wisdom (which is the title of a piece by Jerry Ortiz, on *The Wisdom Page*, and originally from the *Santa Fe Reporter*)? Do you think that modern American society is not particularly tuned in to this idea of wisdom?

CM: I'm afraid that's the case. For a long time, it was just not even talked about. Fortunately in the past decade there has been an increasing interest in it. It's an amorphous thing; wisdom, in a way, is like stupidity—we know what it is when we see it, but because it manifests itself in so many different ways, it's difficult to pin it down and describe it in few words. So, people have a fuzzy sense about it.

Speaking of “fuzzy,” it's as though wisdom doesn't have much of a place in the way that the media chooses and reports, advertisers advertise, or even the way that the American president thinks and speaks about things -- I don't think he uses the term *wisdom* as easily (or fondly!) as he uses words like *strength*, *defend*, and *persevere*. He's more likely to extol the

virtues of “standing strong” than “thinking about the nature of peace.”  
Does this make sense?

CM: That makes a lot of sense, and there is the phrase “philosopher-king,” and that is very much what we *don't* have. Occasionally, you'll find somebody like Vaclav Havel, who is a very wise person in a position of power. There isn't a whole lot of that that goes on, unfortunately.

Some folks do critically think about decisions such as whether or not to invade a country, or whether or not to make the death penalty unconstitutional, or whether we should Marshall all of our resources now to try to save ourselves later from climate change, but I don't think the term *wisdom* is typically explicitly mentioned during such processes. Rarely do people “invoke the idea of wisdom” when discussing, debating, considering, or envisioning. I just don't think that folks out there have a good understanding of the construct. So let me just ask you directly: how would one describe wisdom?

CM: I see it as: a kind of knowledge that helps us make better sense of all our other knowledge; it's sort of a *meta-knowledge* in the dictionary sense of being a more comprehensive kind of knowledge. Wisdom incorporates ordinary knowledge, but it goes beyond it. Wisdom is knowledge that understands process. It puts things into context. It's not that the facts of our life are any different for wiser people, but they have a variety of perspectives and *values*.

One of the problems is that people have always assumed that you just “become wise,” or you don't. Like it's sort of the role of the dice...

JM: Or that you automatically become wise as you age; that is, that an 80-year-old person is clearly wise, much more so than a person of 40.

CM: Well you know that isn't true; there are plenty of 80-year-old people with their heads in the sand who are still continuing to make the same sort

of mistakes they made at 30. But, there is an element of where age does come into it: as we go through life, if we are paying attention, we eventually come to see that there are sort of “rules to the game.” For example, if you’re in a committed relationship, maybe infidelity isn’t a good move. There are some “laws of life” that attentive people tend to pick up on as they go through their lives.

There is also this element of *perspective*. Wise people tend to have a different way of looking at the facts of their existence, and there are a number of these perspectives that can really be helpful and that we can really develop. Example would be the principle of *systems*; understanding systems causes you to look at life a little bit differently than if you don’t understand systems. The same goes for evolution.

There is what I call the *perennial philosophy perspective*: you start to see that our existence is ephemeral but there is something else that is substantial and eternal. We actually have a choice of which one we want to identify with.

Values are central to the wisdom process. You have focused on perspective of these “high values”— *the values of the wise*. Vision, honor, integrity, morality, kindness, courage – those kinds of things. Each of those values represents a vantage point from which we can look at the data of our lives and make more sense of those data.

Another perspective that’s useful is the finite use of our own life. Most people, unfortunately, don’t think about their own death until they are long in years, but if we can come to a realization in our 30s or our 40s that “Oh, this isn’t going to go on forever!” then that adds a certain intensity and a sense of wanting to *use our life* in a way that if we never think about our own death, we might not.

Let me ask you this: do you ever get the feeling that a child has an understanding of wisdom that an adult somehow loses? Obviously it’s true that a 50-year-old person has a much greater chance of understanding and using wisdom than a 3-year-old, but do you see, like I do, that sometimes

having not been shaped and damaged and changed by the world can actually sort of “preserve a pure type of wisdom?”

CM: I think it cuts two ways; little children tend to be very attentive, and I think that is one of the most important things that we can do to become wiser—to be more attentive to what’s going on in our own minds (and we can do that formally through meditation) as well as what’s going on around us. You know, kids just get into stuff – really deeply into what’s going on in the present moment. They also haven’t built up a lot of really bad habits; they haven’t acquired a lot of the bad stuff that we acquire from our culture.

On the other hand, we inherit a negative: our *reactive emotions*. With little children, it is very present: it’s anger, hate, fear. Part of wisdom, as I see it, is developing a perspective on those things in a way of detaching from them so they don’t control our lives; we see them just as “informational inputs.” So, I think there are pluses and minuses with kids; they are just starting off on the path of wisdom and if we as parents can try to surround them with positive influences rather than negative influences, they’re going to not be damaged so much by the culture.

I hear what you’re saying, and I think your answer is wise. I’ve had relationships with kids that make me shake my head and think, “Wow, this child just does not have an understanding of what’s going on here.” And I’ve also heard a 75-year-old person, you know, talk about a particular ethnicity in a denigrating way, and I think, “You just haven’t matured in your mind past the idea that ‘White people are superior in some way.’” So I think you’re right that there is this “vein of wisdom” that runs through a human being from the very beginning and that you can easily step outside of that vein and be mistaken. Hopefully the best that we can do as parents as you say, is take a child and attempt to give them the experiences and the teachings and the boundaries that allow them to spend more time in that particular vein of wisdom, cultivating that within themselves— as opposed to chasing money, being mired in biases, and wasting time. That has to be

the last word right before this commercial, but can you give me another ten minutes after the commercial?

CM: You betcha.

Well, I would say to the listener, Stay tuned and you can hear more wisdom coming from Cop MacDonald's mouth, and more nonsense coming from mine! We'll be right back on *Values and Ethics: from Living Room to Boardroom*.

Francois, Duc de la Rochefoucauld said, "The man who lives free from folly is not so wise as he thinks." And that goes for women as well! That's an apt example of wisdom I think— that wisdom is not attempting to be perfect; I think there is a perspective on wisdom indicative of mistakes being part of the lifelong learning process. There is more than one famous quote about falling 99 times in getting up 100, about one who has not attempted anything is more of a failure than one who has tried and failed but eventually found their way. I think wisdom is too complicated to grasp if you don't scrape your knees by actually living.

Well, it's a Tuesday morning, which means I get the joy of coming to the World Talk Radio studio— which, as fate would have it, is just 30 minutes from where I live— and speak to such interesting guests about such intriguing topics. Not the least of which is Copthorne MacDonald, and near the top of the list would be wisdom. I am also proud to bring a relatively free and clear show to you, the listener, on topics of import such as the present one. So let's get right back to it.

I think one of the best ways to explore wisdom is to go through one quote after another, and chew on it, see how you feel about it. Rule it in or out. Critique it. Get an emotional charge out of it. Compare it/contrast it. Discuss it. Fall in love with it. So I would like to run some quotations by you, Cop; how would that be?

CM: I think quotations can be useful triggers, helpful stimulants. But, I think the process of becoming wiser is something in which we have to go beyond the quotations; I look at your list of 28 *values of the wise* on your website, and I say “Right on!” Those are the values that we have to have internalized close to our heart to be an absolutely wise person.

The question is, how do we do that? How do we develop these values? One may look at the list and say, “I already have those values,” but if we watch our mind and our body, as Wes Nisker was talking about, we may discover, “Oh, I’m not *living* them the way I should.” So the issue is, how can we take these beautiful values that we resonate with intellectually and get them down into our guts. The issue is: how we develop wisdom ourselves; how we become wiser people.

I have two thoughts on this: two approaches. One, is to immerse ourselves in the right kinds of influences; these can be books or radio programs or CDs that help us understand what wisdom is. Certainly, your quotation database. Hanging out with uplifting people. Getting involved with people who are doing worthwhile things. Hanging out people who are working on becoming more attentive— join a meditation group – because that whole process is really about seeing more clearly what is going on within our minds, which gives us more control over what we do. It assists us to take that value and apply it more effectively. Suddenly, you have better communication with what’s going on inside your subconscious.

The other element is actually practicing attentiveness. When you’re talking about seeing our mistakes— what we do wrong— that’s applying attentiveness to our behavior, which is very important. I believe we can also help develop *interpersonal wisdom* by watching the behavior of other people; you know, if they are not handling relationships skillfully, what’s going on there? How can we avoid their mistakes?

Mm-hmm. Do you think that one of the things that would be most useful to humanity – especially as we have a major impact on the planet – is for us to be able to touch our cultures with a magic wand and make us much

wiser, do you think that would go a long ways to improve the situation we are facing?

CM: Absolutely. That's what we need – wiser leaders, a wiser populace, without a doubt. There are different levels, or types, of wisdom, if you will. There is the *intrapersonal* wisdom, which sort of comes first— it's developing those values that you and I share and recognize as the values of the wise.

Then, there is the *interpersonal* wisdom, where we're applying those values in our relationships with other people.

Finally, there is what I would call *large-system* wisdom, which is applying wisdom in sociopolitical situations, the biosphere, etc., and here we need to augment those values with a lot of intellectual knowledge about the way these systems work. You know, what's going on in the biosphere? And *then* we can bring our values to bear on that to reduce damage, and so forth. So, the values and the good heart is not quite enough when we get into the large systems, world governance systems, and so on.

This is something that I refer to in my most recent book, *Matters of Consequence*, as *deep understanding*; it's taking this “personal values” stuff and combining it with the knowledge we need to deal with these larger problems.

I am thinking of the Great Law of the Iroquois Federation – if I have that term correct – where they would discuss as a group what decisions they ought to make, and I think one criterion they use is: how their decision would affect the next seven generations. That's an example of how to use wisdom in the way you referred to as *deep understanding*, is it not?

CM: Absolutely. They had a governance system that had wisdom at its core, absolutely.

Well thank you for that short answer, as we're just about out of time. Life is fleeting, my friend, and time is merciless. I'm sorry that a half hour is all we had today. In summary, I would like to humbly thank you for speaking so highly of *Values of the Wise*. I appreciate that; sometimes I don't feel like it has the impact that I would wish, when I hear from somebody like you that you think that I'm doing a good job describing wisdom it falls like rain on needy soil. I would urge people to check out your webpage, [www.theWisdomPage.com](http://www.theWisdomPage.com) and spend an hour or a day there workin' on their *wisdom schema*!

CM: Wonderful, Jason – great talking with you; bye now.