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Values, Wisdom, and Action

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Kosmos Intro:

A long-time researcher of wisdom tells us how outwardly acquired intellectual knowledge and inwardly acquired insightful knowledge imbue transformative action with wisdom and make it maximally effective.

VALUES

Starting with the Big Bang some 14 billion years ago, energy — that proto-physical proto-mental reality that cannot be created or destroyed — began to cloak itself with form, with patterned information. The detailed outcomes of this evolutionary process have been guided by a set of algorithms we call the laws of nature. Values embedded in the process caused evolution to proceed in certain general directions rather than others. Among those directions are increasing complexity, increasing diversity, increasing specialization, and increasing levels of cooperation between self-interested entities. Cooperation? Yes. Elementary particles cooperate and allow atoms to exist. Atoms cooperate and allow molecules to exist. Molecules cooperate and allow living cells to exist. Cells cooperate and allow plant and animal life to exist. Human beings cooperate and allow human societies to exist.

With the arrival of human beings, the human mind emerged, and with it values and behavior directed by those values. As humans invented new technologies and spread them around the globe, the impact of human behavior became increasingly significant. Increasingly, decisions, guided by human values, overrode the laws-of-nature. For better or worse, we human beings have become powerful agents of evolution. Nobelist Roger Sperry put it bluntly: “Human value priorities...stand out as the most strategically powerful causal control now shaping world events. More than any other causal system with which science now concerns itself, it is variables in human value systems that will determine the future.”

So what are those values? They are a mixed bag, to be sure, ranging from selfishness, hate, greed, envy, and revenge to empathy, truth, justice, honesty, cooperation, compassion, and generosity. Scholarly research during the past 30 years has confirmed our common-sense notion that a person’s deeply internalized values are strongly correlated with their psychological/spiritual/wisdom development. Institutions such as economies, political systems, corporations, NGOs, and international governing bodies

reflect the wisdom and values of their founders and/or those people who currently direct them.

WISDOM

Personal wisdom is located internally and embodied by persons. Words of wisdom and wise behavior arise from it. But wisdom itself is a mode of cognition — one rooted in perspectives, interpretations, and values. Wisdom is not about facts per se; it is about the meaning of facts within a specific context. It is about the significance of facts and their implications. Wisdom is a kind of meta-knowledge that helps us make better sense of the rest of our knowledge. Wisdom does this by 1) relating our ordinary everyday knowledge to a variety of contexts, 2) viewing it from a variety of illuminating perspectives, and 3) bringing into the decision-making process a set of values that seeks the good of the whole and well-being writ large.

Fortunately, the acquisition of wisdom is not something we must leave to the whims of fate, as many in the past have assumed. In the late 1990s there were meetings in Burkina Faso of a “Council of the Wise.” As I understand it, this was a group of people from different countries and backgrounds who wanted to foster the development of wisdom in African culture. A useful outcome of these meetings was the identification of four levels of wisdom:

Potential Sages includes almost everyone. These are busy people who have the potential to become wise, but have never felt the call to intentionally develop wisdom.

Sages in Intention have come to understand what wisdom is, realize that they have the potential to become wise, and have decided, as the Council put it, to “follow the path of their potential.”

Developing Sages are actively involved in wisdom-developing activities.

Established Sages are those who are recognized by others as wise people.

Wisdom takes various forms, and each has its somewhat unique development process. Here I will focus on a process that leads to world transformative wisdom. The general prescription comes out of Abraham Maslow’s study of self-actualizing people — people who the “Council of the Wise” would no doubt have called Established Sages.

Maslow noted that for self-actualizing people, facts were value-laden. Facts had a certain “oughtness” and called for certain actions. His observations led to three conclusions: 1) When we understand the present reality with great clarity and depth, we will also sense the kind of action that is needed. 2) In order to understand reality in that deep way, we need relevant, totally convincing facts. 3) To receive the subtle value messages inherent in those facts, we must approach them “Taoistically,” with a quiet, receptive, patient mind. His conclusions lead us to a two-pronged strategy for developing this “deep

understanding” kind of wisdom: On the one hand, *go outward and acquire relevant intellectual knowledge*. On the other, *go inward and find self-knowledge and a quiet mind*.

DOING WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Intellectual Development

Unfortunately, most of us do not have the breadth of intellectual knowledge that’s needed to get an adequate handle on humanity’s problems. Some of us were educated in the sciences. Others were educated in the humanities. Those educated in either of these “two cultures” often know little about the other, and few in either one understand much about economic realities. (Unfortunately, the education of most economists appears even more narrowly focused.) To be able to deal effectively with the major biospheric, social, and economic problems of our day, we need to become more holistic knowers. We must acquire a deep and comprehensive understanding of the various contexts within which our problems are set. We need to develop a broadly-based intellectual understanding of systems and the system hierarchy that pervades the kosmos; the evolutionary process in its most general sense; consciousness; human cultures; economic systems; and various key principles, laws, and regularities which underlie functioning in all of these areas. As Robert Ornstein and Paul Erlich put it: “We need to be ‘literate’ in entirely new disciplines.”

Fortunately, being literate does not mean that we need to be experts. What we need is access to books, articles, electronic media, websites, online courses, and other resources that can help us grasp a discipline’s key ideas with a reasonable expenditure of time and effort.

Psychological/Spiritual Development

Few of us encounter the reality around and within us with a quiet, receptive, patient mind, listening to what *is* in that Taoistic, fully listening, non-interfering way. To develop this way of being we need intuitive and observational development—facilitated by quiet-minded Eastern practices such as meditation. The exploration of our own psyche leads not only to a quiet, receptive mind, but also to an appreciation of the laws by which our inner, subjective lives operate; ethical understanding; moral behavior; and even insights into the nature of primal reality.

Meditation is generally considered to be the most powerful single tool for interior development. Psychologist Jane Loevinger’s research produced a 9-stage scale of psychological development. The terms she uses for the two highest stages are “autonomous” and “integrated.” Ken Wilber reported that less than 2 percent of the general adult population have managed to reach these top two categories. He then went on to say: “No practice (including psychotherapy, holotropic breathwork, or NLP) has been shown to substantially increase that percentage with one exception. Studies have

shown that consistent meditation practice over several years increases that percentage from 2 percent to an astonishing 38 percent.”

What kind of Meditation? A variety of practices from Eastern and Western mystical traditions are suitable. One that has proven especially effective for Western practitioners goes by the names *mindfulness*, *Vipassana*, and *Insight* meditation. Mindfulness meditation is a practice devoted to the development of attentiveness and the exploration of mind content and function. Initially, one watches physical sensations in a narrowly-focused way — usually sensations connected with breathing. Attempting to pay continuous attention to these subtle sensations settles the mind and develops concentration. This practice is continued until attention is able to remain on the chosen object for a reasonable period. At that point, the focus of attention is widened to include other mental objects: physical sensations, feelings, sounds, incipient thoughts — and ultimately, whatever arises in the mind.

The benefits associated with this type of meditation are many: insight into how the human mind works; insight into our own values and behavior (seeing things that we may have previously denied or repressed); the development of our intuitive process; enhanced access to the subconscious; enhanced creativity; a quieting of the mind that can become quite profound in retreat situations and during long periods of solitude; skill at dealing with reactive emotions; and increased levels of patience, acceptance, and inner peace.

Those who have developed attentiveness/mindfulness to a fairly advanced degree sometimes move on to practices that specifically promote cognizance of the absolute reality and identification with it: *nondual* practices. There are many of these, including Tibetan Buddhism’s Dzogchen, Hinduism’s Advaita Vedanta, and various Taoist and Zen practices. The aim of nondual practice is to become cognizant of Spirit (the ever-present absolute aspect of mind, the ever-present absolute aspect of everything), and realize that your deepest, truest self is nothing other than this primal sentient-active oneness.

As we travel down this path of psychological/spiritual development, our sense of identity becomes more inclusive. Our circle of concern expands in space and time, and with it a shift in our deeply internalized, operational values. A deep caring about the long-term well-being of other people and our planet replaces a tightly confined caring about self, family, clan, and nation. Our surface *professed* values become internalized *functioning* values that dictate what we actually do.

Wisdom as a Guide to Action

Deep understanding — this mix of outwardly acquired intellectual knowledge and inwardly acquired insightful knowledge — is not society-transforming action, per se, but it imbues our transformative action with wisdom and makes it maximally effective. Many *Kosmos* readers are already clear about what they want to do with their lives. They have thought about their capabilities and the skills they are able bring to the transformational party. They know the kinds of leverage they have: perhaps specialized knowledge, money, persuasive skills, an established leadership role, or a field where they

can exert influence. Moreover, they already know where they want to commit their time and energy. Others aren't yet clear about these things, but as one pursues wisdom development activities, clarity eventually comes. The challenge is not only to live wiser personal lives, but also to use that personal wisdom to advance the guiding values of society's institutions.

The life work of some of us focuses on the big picture. Among them are spiritual leaders like the Dalai Lama, globally minded political leaders, leaders in the transformational community such as members of the Club of Budapest, and a host of scholars who try to make ever-increasing sense of the great complexity in which we humans are immersed. The rest of us have chosen to focus on narrower, more specific transformational tasks. That said we must be careful not to get lost in the details of our tasks to the exclusion of the ultimate purpose of our activity to improve and better the whole. We need to step back frequently from our doing, broaden our attention, and take in the big picture. We need get in touch with both the underlying ONE (out of which everything flows), and the super-complex ALL (which the ONE has brought into existence).

Amazing things happen if we have developed the capacity to identify with the Source of the whole process — call it Spirit, or Energy, or Energy-Awareness. In his book about finite and infinite games, James Carse called attention to two interesting things about infinite games. First, the only purpose of an infinite game “is to prevent it from coming to an end, to keep everyone in play.” Second, “There is but one infinite game.” The cosmic process is that game, and Earth is our playing field. Spirit in all its forms plays this game. And the core objective is to keep the game going. We see this in the natural world. Wherever things can grow, they will grow: the biosphere recovers from massive extinctions. Ravaged forests eventually grow back. Grass takes root in pavement cracks.

People — Spirit in human form — can't help playing this game. And, like the grass and the trees, most play it unconsciously. People, however, have the potential to wake up and play with awareness and conscious intention. Clearly comprehending what *is* leads to a vision of what *should be*. And for most who come to that kind of deep, clear seeing, comes an urge to act, to make things right, to *implement* the vision.

We are Spirit in human form, and since the evolutionary refinement of physical/mental complexity is clearly Spirit's central project, it is also *our* project. When we carry the process of inner development to the point where our sense of self includes the ONE and the ALL, that old sense of separation between personal and universal disappears. Personal purposes align with cosmic purposes, and we become cosmic adventurers and conscious agents of evolution — appreciating and up-leveling what is, and fostering betterment and well-being wherever we go.

We enter the cosmic arena with two melded identities: from the relative-reality perspective, we see ourselves as fallible, short-lived human beings — albeit, human beings with a much clearer-than-ordinary understanding of the game and of our roles as transformational players. When we flip to the absolute-reality perspective, we know we

are Spirit and thus, simply, naturally, and unquestionably committed to Spirit's mammoth undertaking.

If you are not yet consciously participating in this adventure of all adventures, think about it, feel about it, and meditate on it. I encourage you to find and enter the arena of Spirit. There, the egoic search for success and significance ends — and yet, the most exciting game ever is still under way. Conscious players are needed. Come in, and play to your heart's content.

Copthorne Macdonald created **The Wisdom Page** to provide Internet access to wisdom-related resources. Among his eight published books are *Toward Wisdom*, *Getting a Life*, and *Matters of Consequence*. *Matters of Consequence* explores the "deep understanding" approach to personal and societal transformation discussed in this *Kosmos* article. <http://www.wisdompage.com/>