

The question is, “is it possible to live a philosophic life?” And the answer is a resounding “yes”

Seriously, we have just demonstrated that it is possible to put into practice a philosophic principle. We just paused.

Many traditions, philosophic, religious, spiritual or not, make a distinction between the outer, physical world and our inner world. Our first step in discovering and connecting with this inner world is by coming to rest.

Letting the body and the active mind come to rest is powerful and beneficial whether or not we realise that it can also be a philosophic principle and whether or not we see any spiritual significance.

But it does have a philosophic and spiritual significance. It says in the Katha Upaniṣad:

“God made sense turn outward, man therefore looks outward, not into himself. Now and again a daring soul, desiring immortality, has looked back and found himself.”

Katha Upanishad II.1.1 tr Sri Purohit Swami and W B Yeats

In the School of Economic Science, and here in the Practical Philosophy Berkshire branch, we have been offering courses in practical philosophy. If we didn't believe it possible to live a life philosophic then at the very least we should be done under the Trades Description Act.

In this talk this morning I want to say something about what I mean by practical philosophy and then give some specific examples for how some principles can be put into practice.

Philosophy is the Love of Wisdom. We could spend the whole session just discussing what is meant by wisdom and we could spend the equivalent of another whole session or more on what it means to Love something.

Instead, I'm going to suggest that to paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart "we know it when we see it"

When we run the philosophy classes, having explained that the word philosophy means the love of wisdom, we ask what people understand by wisdom, what are its characteristics? Now philosophers ancient and modern, academic or not, have written thousands of pages on the topic, so some might think it unfair to ask the question on the first evening of the course. To try and make it practical we ask what are the characteristics of a wise person.

No list would be complete but typically answers include that a wise person:

- acts from knowledge not ignorance
- is open not closed
- is compassionate and caring
- listens
- does not criticise or cause harm
- sees the bigger picture
- is not selfish

What is sometimes surprising when we look at the list is that there is nothing strange or esoteric on the list.

If we change this to first person:

- I act from knowledge not ignorance
- I am open not closed
- I am compassionate and caring
- I listen
- I do not criticise or cause harm
- I see the bigger picture
- I am not selfish

We know how to act this way and sometimes we do – but that’s the caveat - for us it’s “sometimes”. For the wise it’s constant.

So, one of the aims of practical philosophy is to help us recognise that we do have the capability to be wise, we have the talents and tools – but they need to be developed and strengthened through practice.

One of the practices that we introduce in the classes is to ask oneself “what would a wise man or woman do now?” Just asking oneself the question at moments of uncertainty or doubt or even as an internal ‘second opinion’ can shed revealing insights on the situation. And this is true without having to go into deep intellectual analysis of what we mean by Love of Wisdom.

I recommend this as a practice.

I have found the practice useful recently, for example, when tempted to put off preparing for this talk or having determined to get on with it finding distractions and temptations appearing in the mind. To be honest sometimes the distractions won but often just the reminder that the wise person would just get on with it was sufficient.

Now a question worth considering is why study – or at least be interested – in philosophy.

For some people the answer might be curiosity or an intellectual interest to understand what the great thinkers of the past have thought. To come to an understanding of what Plato or Thomas Aquinas or Ficino or Hume or any of countless others thought.

For some it could be to understand what the philosophic principles were that influenced the great events or movements in our culture or civilisation or in other cultures.

For others, because of its interrelationship with their other studies or interests. There is the famous degree course of PPE. And there are clear interrelationships between philosophy and religion, philosophy and psychology, etc. There is now a movement for teaching philosophy in schools at least in part to help children develop their powers of reasoning and critical thinking.

All of these are valid and commendable.

Any and all of these are good reasons to study philosophy but without the need to practise anything.

There is a whole branch of philosophy called ethics. Here both study and practice are valuable. We could call this 'how to be a better person and a better member of society'. To understand oneself better, to play one's part better, to help others, etc.

All of which is valuable – arguably vital. It's hard to imagine being considered wise – and of course it is best if that accolade comes from others rather than oneself – hard to be considered wise if one is not playing one's part fully and nicely for the benefit of all.

There are of course many systems of philosophy, not just here, which have an ethical component.

But there is another aspect to philosophy and one that is at the heart of philosophy here in the School – and that is Self-knowledge

Now this needs some explanation

Here in the School the underpinning philosophy for all that we study and practise is the philosophy of Advaita: the philosophy of non-duality, of unity.

We are unashamedly Absolutists.

That is, we believe in a universal spiritual dimension – beyond the physical, the mental and the emotional realms. Being beyond those realms it is universal and not subject to the changes in the everyday creation. It is absolute, singular, unchanging, eternal.

If you're religious you might call it God, or Allah or Jehovah.

To avoid the religious connotations, we refer to it as Absolute or Consciousness.

If it is absolute, singular, unchanging, eternal then it is here, now – indeed it is everywhere and everywhen including in me, now – and indeed in each of us. It is our essence, our essential nature.

Our experience however seems to be that everything in the creation is constantly changing and that I exist as a separate individual looking out¹ at the world and specifically at this room of entities that also regard themselves as separate individuals.

The essence of the Advaita philosophy – the philosophy of non-duality, of unity - is that in truth there is no difference between the individual and the universal.

In English, this is often represented using the word 'self' – with a little 's' to represent the individual and with a big 'S' to represent the universal.

¹ Kena Upanisad:

The enquirer asked:

'What has called my mind to the hunt? What has made my life begin? What wags in my tongue? What God has opened eye and ear?

The teacher answered:

It lives in all that lives, hearing through the ear, thinking through the mind, speaking through the tongue, seeing through the eye.

We spend a lot of time in the School studying the Vedanta literature and, where we can, in its original in Sanskrit. As many of you know, we look at the Gita and the Upanishads and the works and commentaries by the great teacher Śankara. And to bring it up to today, the School leader meets regularly with the current Śankarāchārya. Those conversation provide enormous help in our studies and it is actually from part of the conversation in 2017 that I am basing much of the latter part of this talk.

Back to the principle of Advaita and Vedanta. We study the Vedantic philosophy because it deals directly with Advaita, with unity.

Some of you may have heard of Bryan Magee – author, broadcaster, MP, philosopher. In his book, *Confessions of a Philosopher*², he says:

I found that (the Upaniṣads) said that the entire world of human knowledge and experience consisted of images only, which were fleeting and had no abiding reality... They said that what presented this indefinite number of variegated images to our minds was not an equal number of un-get-at-able somethings corresponding to the separate images, but just one big something... It was only images that were disparate, individual, separate. And because images were images, and were subjective and ephemeral, and above all because we had a natural tendency to mistake them for independently existing things, they could not unreasonably be classed as illusions. Separate things, then – separate any things, including people – were illusions. In reality everything was one.

Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher*, 1997

Many of you will have heard terms like Brahman and Atman. These are Sanskrit terms and usually Brahman is a term for the universal Self (capital 'S') and often Ātman for the individual self (little 's').

² “This book introduces the reader to philosophy and its history through the story of one person’s encounter with them. So it is about ideas: the autobiographical element is medium, not message” - preface

In the literature³ there is one of the great sayings:

ayam ātmā brahma

अयमात्मा ब्रह्म

This very Ātman, this individual Self, is Brahman, the universal Self.

It naturally follows that this self is the same Self in all beings. In essence, we are all one.

Now this is given as a statement of fact. For most of us, even those of us who might call themselves students of Advaita, I suspect this is a theory, a postulation, a belief.

Here in the School we regularly remind the students neither to accept nor reject anything that is said here. A fundamental principle of all philosophy is – or at least it should be – that we should use our own innate sense of reason to discover for ourselves the truth, or otherwise, of these statements.

And we call the groups Practical Philosophy because the aim is to put these principles into practice, to discover for ourselves the validity of the principles

So, this is one of the fundamental ways to live a philosophic life – to develop our own power of reason. To think, to study, to challenge our own preconceived ways of thinking. We can challenge other people's way of thinking but that is often to try and enforce our way of thinking. Self challenge, self-enquiry is the fundamental process.

³ Brihadaranyaka Upanisad

How to make all this practical?

In the School we meet regularly and discuss some of these principles with an aim of taking them into our daily lives.

We have a number of practices. I've mentioned some already. We value and encourage stillness – in body, mind and heart.

Everyone I expect will know at least the opening lines of the William Henry Davies poem "What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare."

Here is the full poem.

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance.
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began.
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

The suggestion is that we miss the world and all its beauty if we are too busy and preoccupied to see what is right before our eyes.

But more than that, stillness and inner silence are valuable in their own right. Stillness and silence bring us closer to our own Self, which is the underlying source of that very stillness and silence.

To quote Max Picard:

Silence is nothing merely negative; it is not the mere absence of speech. It is a positive, a complete world in itself.

Silence has greatness simply because it is. It is, and that is its greatness, its pure existence.

There is no beginning to silence and no end: it seems to have its origins in the time when everything was still pure Being. It is uncreated, everlasting Being.

When silence is present, it is as though nothing but silence had ever existed... it is the only basic phenomenon that is always at (our) disposal... No other basic phenomenon is so present in every moment as silence.⁴

Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, 1948(?)

⁴ Quoted as in in preface to *The Spirit of Silence*, John Lane, 2006

And so, I recommend that we find time each day to be still, to connect with the ever-present silence. We will find ultimately that this silence is not a physical silence and certainly not dependent on anything external – no matter how quiet the world is around us, there is always some movement, some noise – but the silence that is ever present, is – as Max Picard suggests – pure Being, ever available.

This connection with stillness, with Being, can and should be developed. In the school we practice Mantra meditation, and quiet reflection and contemplation on the words of the wise. There are many traditions and techniques and I encourage you to find something, practise something to bring body and mind to stillness, regularly.

What has been talked about so far is, as it were, things we can do by ourselves, alone.

I'd like to move outwards and consider how we might live a philosophic life when we are out and about, carrying out our activities in the world.

In the tradition, it is said that the wise have the following prayer, a wish for the whole world and everyone in it:

May all be happy

May all be without disease

May all creatures have well-being

And none be in misery of any sort.

A terrific sentiment and before we dismiss it as unobtainable and unrealistic, just consider it as an ideal that is worth striving for. Would we actually wish for the opposite?

But more than just an ideal; it is eminently practical. We can ask ourselves whether our actions and our motives are helping ourselves and others move towards happiness and well-being; or are they causing others disease or misery.

If it's a tradition of the wise to say this prayer every morning and if we ask ourselves what a wise person would do, then it naturally follows that it would be reasonable for us also to say this prayer every morning. Wouldn't it be nice if we could act every day with this intention? It will make a difference to how we act and how we view the world if we commit to act in such a way as to increase the happiness and well-being of all.

And let's not forget that when we say 'May all be happy' that all includes us.

Kabir, the 15th century mystic and poet who unified and transcended the limitations of Islam and Hinduism, wrote of the joy that was both individual and universal.

Dance, My Heart!

Dance, my heart! dance to-day with joy.

The strains of love fill the days and the nights with music, and the world is listening to its melodies:

Mad with joy, life and death dance to the rhythm of this music. The hills and the sea and the earth dance. The world of man dances in laughter and tears.

Why put on the robe of the monk, and live aloof from the world in lonely pride?

Behold! my heart dances in the delight of a hundred arts; and the Creator is well pleased.

Kabir, Songs of Kabir

To help in this consideration we can look at six specific attributes of the wise man or woman in action. Six attributes that we can practise and aim to emulate. They are:

- No cruelty
- Honourable, noble
- Respect for the wise
- Self-disciplined
- Accomplished
- Generous

Now I hope that it is fairly uncontentious that these are all reasonable qualities to aim for. If in doubt, is there anyone who think that children, say, should be brought up to be:

- Cruel
- Without a sense of honour
- Disrespectful
- Undisciplined
- Incompetent
- Mean

Before we look at these six in more detail I want to just remind you of the aim of the study and practice of philosophy here in the School. It is for self-knowledge.

Over the entrance to the Oracle at Delphi were the words “Know Thyself”

Socrates says “The unexamined life is not worth living”

Even though we’re told that the individual and the universal are one and the same we do not know this to be so. We might believe it but we do not know it. And the major reason that we do not know it is because of identification with and attachment to our own separate, individual existence. This identification and attachment is so ingrained in us that we take it to be true and don’t see it in operation.

It doesn’t appear that when I wake up I choose to be Stephen Silver; I am Stephen Silver.

It would be a bit like going to bed fully clothed. When you wake up in the morning nothing would have to be done to get dressed, because the clothes are already on.

This covering, this belief in the ultimate reality of the individual, is the clothing that we never take off.

Believing ourselves to be this individual separate self, we have forgotten that in truth we are no different from the universal Self.

Practising these virtues, or at least sincerely trying to, will be beneficial for oneself and all around us. More importantly, they have the potential to show up particular aspects of this individual, separate self that get in the way – and being seen there is the beginning of the possibility of choice so that these negative aspects can be weakened and transcended.

The first of the six virtuous qualities is 'Without cruelty'. What might be meant by this. Most of us I trust don't kick the cat; if asked we would say that we do not wish to cause harm or injury to anyone.

But this means more than that. Gandhi used the word - ahinsa – non-violence. In the Sanskrit dictionary, ahinsa is translated as not causing harm at any level physical, mental, emotional.

Why would anyone be cruel or cause harm - it is never reasonable and cannot be justified - and yet I suspect that everyone in this room has on occasion said a harsh word, hurt someone's feelings (often someone one loves).

Why is that?

We have acted without reason - either too quickly, carelessly, or overcome by some personal emotion, idea, attachment, desire. We've put our own situation first and intentionally or unintentionally not considered the effect on others.

We need to take responsibility – at least up to a point – for the effect of our actions.

And we could extend this beyond just individuals that we know. We could ask whether or not our actions harm people that we don't know or society in general. Driving slowly in the middle lane of the motorway? Not paying our taxes?

The obvious extension to this principle of not acting cruelly is to humanity as a whole and to the environment. And here we can be talking about indirect effect of our actions. Are our actions contributing to global warming, pollution, threat of species extinction, economic poverty?

If we admit that we might on occasion act in such a way as to be cruel, to cause harm, then as serious students of philosophy it is beholden on us at least look at the causes.

If we bring it back to our dealings with other people one of the most obvious examples where we fail to live up to the ideal is through criticism – even silently in the mind. There may be times when we need to correct someone's behaviour or point out deficiencies in someone's work – but we know the difference, the quality, the taste, when it is done with a criticism of the person.

It is well known in business of the importance to distinguish between the person and the behaviour; of the need to praise the person and still correct the

behaviour. We don't love our children or family members any the less even when they do things wrong.

For there to be criticism, or any form of cruelty, we must have forgotten that in truth I am the Self and the person in front is the Self. Instead we will have identified ourselves with a limited view of ourselves and a limited view of the other person.

Speaking or acting with criticism or cruelty reinforces these mistaken beliefs of this covering. Acting or speaking without criticism or cruelty weakens the hold of these mistaken beliefs and reinforces the knowledge of the Self within.

So, we can start with a terrific practice, which is not giving expression to criticism.

It is worth noting that one of the obvious targets of our criticism is ourselves. Self-criticism is one of the most damaging forms of criticism and not to be indulged in.

The next is honourable, noble.

We recognise when other people are being honourable, noble.

It has the quality of doing the right thing, even when it might be tempting not to. Of honesty, not being selfish, of seeing a bigger picture, truthfulness.

Many of Shakespeare's plays draw out the nobility in key characters and there is the famous quotation from Hamlet:

What a piece of work is a man,
how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties,
in form and moving how express and admirable,
in action how like an angel,
in apprehension how like a god!
the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals

Hamlet, Act 2 Scene 2

What about for us? Are we noble, honourable.

It can be as trivial as letting your guest have the last portion; or as ordinary as giving back change if you've been given too much.

We know people who are quick to put others first, who are always willing to help.

Now being honourable, noble may be an ideal; but one of the purposes of an ideal is that it is something to strive towards. The striving makes us stronger.

But there is another value to the ideal. Do we see that any time we fail to live up to the ideal we have the opportunity to see what has got in the way – a selfish idea, a habit, a personal desire?

When we begin to see these things operating in us, we need to be grateful to have been given the opportunity to see them. It is easy to slip into self-criticism – I shouldn't act that way – but remember self-criticism is off the list.

Respect for the wise.

Whoever we consider to be wise, it is implicit that we regard them to be at least in some respect wiser than us.

So how do we show respect?

Two ways present themselves.

The first is to believe them. When it comes to mind that the wise say one thing but I believe another then we could weigh in the balance which is more likely to be correct. We already have decided that they are wiser than us and so it is not unreasonable that they are more likely to be a better guide than the thoughts, ideas, desires in our own mind.

The key here is what is reasonable. The power of reason is the key tool for the student of philosophy.

It is not a blind faith, it is not based on what other people have said, it is a determination for oneself that it resonates truly with one's own experience.

The second way of showing respect is to follow what the wise have said – to put it into action, to be a living example.

Self-disciplined almost goes without saying - nothing serious can be achieved without some effort.

Yet the idea of being self-disciplined can have some negative connotations.

The thing with being self-disciplined is that there is an implication is that it is something that has to be learnt. We can see that for the baby and the toddler, and older children, that they are not very disciplined. When hungry they demand food, when tired they need to sleep, if they want something they get upset if they don't get it.

As adults we are expected to show some restraint to this demand for instant gratification of these sensory appetites and to practice restraint of excess.

We have learnt to act with restraint, with reason.

Most of these disciplines start with being imposed from outside. For example, most of us had to learn to be on time for school; to get our homework in on time. Hopefully for most of most of the time this made it easy to turn up for work on time and to deliver our commitments on time. We may not think of it as a discipline, just normal, correct behaviour.

However, we fail to follow the discipline when something else gets in the way.

And what is it which gets in the way? And I'm not talking of when things outside of our control go wrong, like train delays. Rather it the personal decisions not to follow the discipline such as desire, selfish consideration, habit, laziness? The list can be quite long. Marcus Aurelius asked himself when he felt like staying in bed is this what he had been born for, to stay under the covers.

Self discipline implies doing the right thing, even when we don't feel like it.

One of the challenges with discipline, self-discipline, is that it is seen as a constraint as a limitation to personal freedom. But a little self-examination shows that the opposite is true – that without self-discipline we are ruled by habits, desires, and there is no freedom in that.

Pope John Paul II said the same. He of course uses God for the universal.

Those who live “by the flesh” experience God’s law as a burden, and indeed as a denial or at least a restriction of their own freedom. On the other hand, those who are impelled by love and ‘walk by the Spirit’ (Gal 5:16), and who desire to serve others, find in God’s Law the fundamental and necessary way in which to practise love as something freely chosen and freely lived out.

Pope John Paul II Encyclical “*Spiritus Splendor*” 1993

Accomplished

To be good at what we do takes effort, dedication.

We have all been given gifts, natural talents. We didn’t ask for them, we didn’t do anything to get them – but we’ve been given them in potential and to make use of them, ideally for the benefit of all.

Remember - May all be happy.

Some of us are good at some things – we may be good with numbers, artistic, naturally good with children, athletic, etc.

It is up to us to make use of them and by making use of them to excel. That doesn't mean that we will succeed at everything that we do, but we will know whether or not we tried our best.

As Eric Liddell said: "In the dust of defeat as well as the laurels of victory there is a glory to be found if one has done one's best."

Why would we not do our best?

When our children were growing up their school reports used to have both an achievement grade and an effort grade for each subject. I always felt that the effort grade was more important.

We can see in ourselves when we have not given of our best and it's always going to be because of some personal idea, or desire that gets in the way.

Generous

This is not just talking about money – although that shouldn't be forgotten. It's about our time, our knowledge and our talents.

Do we give of our time and talents freely or begrudgingly? Do we give expecting something in return?

We will know of various parables like the river and the pond – the pond wants to hold on to its water and so stale and eventually dries up; whereas the river flows to the sea providing refreshment and sustenance along the way and is itself continuously refreshed.

The corollary of restraining self criticism is to be generous to oneself – to be kind to ourselves. Not to beat ourselves up, although there is work to be done.

Having looked at these six, we will have noticed that there is a common theme to the challenges to them- attachment, desire, ego; and the remedy is the same: detachment, surrender of the personal, limited view.

And it seems sometimes a challenge – but nothing worthwhile comes without effort.

So when we see that we are failing in some way to live up to one or the other of these values, we should use that as a spur to try harder. There is a principle that we should give that which we feel we most lack.

Or as Shakespeare put it; ‘assume a virtue, if you have it not’⁵.

So is it possible to live a philosophic life – of course it is. But the only one who can do it is ourselves – because it is only ourselves, this limited view of ourselves, which is standing in the way of us realising our true nature.

⁵ “Assume a virtue, if you have it not.

That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery
That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence; the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature.”
Hamlet

So I encourage us all to:

- Find time to be still and appreciate inner silence
- Remember and consciously dedicate the day that all may be happy
- Practice these six qualities – remember practice makes perfect – and not to be self-critical when deficiencies are seen; rather be grateful that they have been seen and welcome the opportunity to step over them on this occasion at least.

And so let's pause.