

## *Introduction*

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Happy are those who find wisdom . . .  
 She is more precious than jewels,  
 And nothing you desire can compare with her. . . .  
 Get wisdom, get insight: do not forget.

—Book of Proverbs: The Bible

What is wisdom and how can it be cultivated? These are two of the most important questions of human existence, yet they are tragically neglected in our contemporary culture. We are inundated with information and drowning in data, yet largely bereft of wisdom. As T. S. Eliot (1936) put it:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
 Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

This is a dangerous imbalance, and the fate of our species and our planet may well depend on giving wisdom a more central place in both our personal and public lives.

How did wisdom fade from our awareness? After all, for centuries it was revered as one of the greatest of all human virtues. Thousands of years ago, sages such as the Stoic philosopher Epictetus urged, “Content yourself with being a lover of wisdom, a seeker of truth” (Epictetus, 1995, p. 31), while Jewish proverbs exclaimed, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom” (Proverbs 4:7).

Yet in recent centuries, wisdom slipped from Western awareness. Dazzled by the flood of scientific discoveries and technological breakthroughs, people dreamed that science would answer all questions and technology solve all problems. Science became scientism, technology the new savior, and knowledge—not wisdom—the key to living well.

Science and technology certainly delivered miracles. Yet in unwise hands, they also delivered unpredictable and unprecedented disasters, as the awesome power of modern technology dramatically multiplied the impact of human actions. As a result, populations exploded, pollution spread, resources were depleted, wars became genocidal, and the very health of the planet deteriorated.

Like the sorcerer's apprentice, humankind now possesses enormous knowledge, awesome power, and little wisdom. And that is a potentially lethal combination. As Robert Sternberg, former president of the American Psychological Association, lamented, "If there is anything the world needs, it is wisdom. Without it, I exaggerate not at all in saying that very soon, there may be no world" (Sternberg, 2007).

Fortunately, recent years have seen the beginnings of a major reevaluation. Science is no longer worshiped as simply a savior, technophilia and technophobia jostle ambivalently, and wisdom is coming out of the closet. In society at large, there is talk of, for example, elder wisdom, native wisdom, and wisdom cultures.

Scientists have recently joined the quest. Though they long regarded it as too abstruse for investigation, research on wisdom is beginning. But though there is growing interest, the research is as yet preliminary and the information obtained is, by traditional standards, far from profound. The great questions of life and death that sages ponder are as yet unasked in modern laboratories. Of course, this is not surprising for a new research field. Moreover, science must measure and count. Yet what really matters can't always be measured, and what really counts can't always be counted.

If our contemporary culture has only a superficial understanding of wisdom, then the obvious question becomes, "Where can we go for the deepest understanding of wisdom and of how to develop it?" The answer is clear: to the world's great religions and their accompanying philosophies and psychologies. For here, often hidden behind conventional beliefs and rituals, are preserved records of the insights of sages, the depths of existential exploration, and the heights of human understanding.

Of course, the world's religions contain a curious mix of high and low, transcendence and nonsense, sagacity and stupidity. Yet the quest for wisdom has long been one of their central goals. For example, Jews and Christians claim that wisdom "is more precious than jewels" (Proverbs 3:15),

while the Koran declares, “[T]hose to whom wisdom is given; they truly have received abundant good” (Koran II: 269). In Hinduism the cultivation of wisdom constitutes a major spiritual path or yoga, while in Buddhism wisdom is regarded as the preeminent spiritual capacity.

But what we need above all else are methods to nurture wisdom. Fortunately, the contemplative core of the great religions contains these methods. Each tradition preserves methods for actually cultivating wisdom through systematic practices such as contemplation, meditation, yoga, and reflection on the great mysteries of life and death. These practices constitute a veritable “art of wisdom” or “science of wisdom.” At their best, therefore, the great religions contain both timeless treasuries of humankind’s accumulated wisdom and effective methods for fostering it.

How can this treasury be brought to the contemporary world? One strategic method is to gather distillations of wisdom from each of the great religions and their accompanying philosophies and psychologies. In short, to create a book that offers summaries of each tradition’s sapiential principles and practices. These are the goals of *The World’s Great Wisdom*.

To achieve these goals, I sought outstanding scholar-practitioners from each of the great religions, as well as from Western philosophy, to contribute chapters. These contributors are all both noted scholars with expert intellectual knowledge of their tradition as well as practitioners who use their tradition’s reflective and contemplative techniques themselves. They therefore have both intellectual and experiential expertise in their traditions. This direct experience and prolonged practice is essential, because if there is one thing on which the world’s wisdom traditions agree, it is that to fully comprehend deep wisdom requires careful preparation and practice.

Having found these contributors, I asked them to address several topics from the perspective of their traditions, and especially the major questions:

- What is wisdom?
- How is it cultivated?
- What are its implications for individuals, society, and the world?

The book’s final section compares these chapters and examines wisdom from an integral perspective. This comparison allows us to identify unique features and common themes among traditions, and to extract general principles and practices.

Wisdom is both vast and profound, potentially encompassing all of life, and consequently we need a large framework from which to examine

it. Integral theory offers a remarkably encompassing conceptual framework, and so the final chapters introduce integral theory and use it to enrich the comparative analyses.

*The World's Great Wisdom*, therefore, offers a distillation and examination of the world's priceless heritage of humanity's deepest insights into the great questions and issues of life. It constitutes a unique resource that, for the first time in history, brings together one of our most priceless treasures: humankind's understandings of wisdom and the ways to nurture it.

## References

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