

The Transmission of Wisdom: The Task of Gnostic Intermediaries

La Transmisión de Sabiduría: El Cometido de los Intermediarios Gnósticos

Roger Walsh*

University of California
Irvine, California, USA

Abstract

Wisdom is one of the seven qualities that authentic contemplative traditions aim to foster. This wisdom is said to be a combination of existential understanding and practical life skill, as well as transrational, intuitive insight. Transmitting this wisdom is the task of gnostic intermediaries, and this transmission requires three things. First, it requires cultivating wisdom through contemplative practices; second, mastering the linguistic and conceptual system of the community to whom you wish to communicate; and third, translating aspects of the wisdom into this linguistic and conceptual system. This is obviously a demanding task. However, it is also an essential one for our time, as scholars and practitioners seek to understand the deeper significance of contemplative practices, psychologies, and philosophies.

Key Words: Contemplation, Gnostic intermediary, State of consciousness, Transmission, Wisdom

Resumen

La sabiduría es una de las siete cualidades que las auténticas tradiciones contemplativas se proponen fomentar. Se dice que esta sabiduría es una combinación de entendimiento existencial y habilidad de vida práctica, así como transrational, comprensión intuitiva. La transmisión de esta sabiduría es la tarea de los intermediarios gnósticos, y esta transmisión requiere tres cosas. Primero, requiere cultivar la sabiduría mediante prácticas contemplativas; segundo, dominando el sistema lingüístico y conceptual de la comunidad a quien se desea comunicarse; y tercero, traduciendo aspectos de la sabiduría en este sistema lingüístico y conceptual. Esta es obviamente una tarea exigente. Sin embargo, es también una tarea esencial para nuestro tiempo, como estudiantes y practicantes que procuran entender el significado más profundo de prácticas contemplativas, psicologías, y filosofías.

Palabras Clave: Contemplación, Intermediario Gnostico, Estado de Consciencia, Transmisión, Sabiduría

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Happy are those who find wisdom....
She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her....
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace....
Get insight, get wisdom: do not forget
(Jewish Torah, Proverbs 3:13, 17, 4:5).

A central claim of contemplative disciplines is that they cultivate wisdom. In fact, cultivating wisdom is one of the seven central practices common to the world's great religious and spiritual traditions (Walsh, 1999).

Likewise, a central claim of many contemplative psychologies, philosophies, and texts is that parts of them conceptualize and analyze aspects of this wisdom. Examples include psychologies such as Buddhist Abhidharma, philosophies such as Chinese Taoism or Indian Vedanta, and texts such as the Christian contemplative *Philokalia*.

What we usually think of as wisdom, I would define as deep understanding of, and practical skill in responding to, the central existential issues of life. Greek philosophers referred to this understanding as *sophia*, and to this practical skill as *phronesis* (Sternberg & Jordan, 2005).

However, the wisdom that contemplative disciplines claim to cultivate, and that these philosophies and psychologies analyze, adds something further. For contemplative wisdom finds its deepest basis in a direct, intuitive transcendental apprehension (Walsh, 1999; Wilber, 2006). This wisdom has many names, such as *gnosis* (Christianity), *jnana* (Hinduism), *prajna* (Buddhism), *hokhmah* (Judaism), and *ma'rifah* (Islam). This transrational wisdom, which we might call *transnoia*, seems to foster *sophia* and *phronesis*, while also adding further depth and richness to them. It is therefore not surprising that some of history's greatest contemplatives have also been regarded as some of history's wisest sages, e.g. Christianity's Dionysus, Hinduism's Shankara, Islam's Ibn Arabi, Kashmir Shaivism's Abinavagupta, Neo-Confucianism's Wang Yang-ming, and the Buddha.

However, the distinctive nature of contemplative wisdom immediately presents a challenge to anyone who would comprehend it, and even more to anyone who would communicate it. For this wisdom is largely obtained in altered states of consciousness and postconventional stages of development that are usually accessible only after considerable contemplative practice. Understanding contemplative wisdom may therefore require experiencing these states, stages, and relevant insights, for oneself.

This is a specific example of a more general principle that there are limitations on understanding transpersonal experiences and insights without direct experience of them. These limitations can be understood in several ways. For example, they can be considered in terms of states of consciousness as examples of state-specific knowledge (Tart, 2001). Likewise, they can be considered developmentally as stage-specific understanding; in classical epistemological terms as the requirement that we open "the eye of contemplation" (Wilber, 1996); and linguistically as the inherent difficulty of understanding a signifier (word or term) without having experienced the relevant signified experience (Wilber, 2001).

What then does it require to apprehend and understand the transpersonal wisdom of contemplative disciplines? In a word, it requires practice. One must take up a contemplative practice so as to open one's own "eye of contemplation." Only by actually doing contemplative practices can we mature and open

ourselves to the deeper insights and understandings they offer. As the translator of Patanjali's yoga sutras wrote:

It is axiomatic in the yoga tradition that 'knowledge is different in different states of consciousness' (Rig Veda). In other words our level of consciousness completely determines how much of the truth we see in any given situation. The clearer our minds, the more correctly we evaluate our experience (Shearer, 1989, p. 26).

However, to communicate these insights and understandings effectively requires something more. It requires that we become *gnostic intermediaries*. So what is a gnostic intermediary? Carl Jung (Jung, 1966) used the term to refer to Wilhelm, the translator of the *I Ching*, who Jung suggested was able to transmit, not only the ideas, but also the underlying wisdom of the *I Ching*. Jung does not seem to have developed the concept further, but we can amplify it as follows.

First, let me suggest a definition. "A *gnostic intermediary* is a person who is able to effectively translate and transmit contemplative wisdom from one culture or community to another. This translation/transmission can be across cultures (e.g. Indian yogic wisdom to Western culture) or across times (from archaic language and concepts into contemporary forms, e.g. communicating early Christian contemplative wisdom to contemporary Christian communities)."

What does this require? Well, it seems to require three tasks and three corresponding capacities:

- First, one must imbibe and become the wisdom oneself, since while one can *have* knowledge, one must *be* wise. This, of course, is a major task. In fact, when we are talking about profound contemplative wisdom it can take a lifetime. The essence of this step is contemplative practice.
- The second requirement for gnostic intermediaries is linguistic and conceptual competence. They must master the language and conceptual system of the people and culture to which they wish to communicate. For professionals, this means mastering one's professional conceptual frame work, e.g., psychology or philosophy.
- The third requirement is translational. Gnostic intermediaries must be able to translate the wisdom from the wisdom bearing culture or tradition into the language and conceptual system of the recipient community. The goal is to make the wisdom understandable, legitimate, and even compelling.

This is the challenge and opportunity for all those who would draw from and communicate the world's contemplative wisdom. As such it is a challenge and opportunity of our time for teachers of contemplation, for transpersonal and integral psychologists, and for scholars of the world's contemplatively based psychologies and philosophies.

It is a large task. However, it is also an essential one for our time, as scholars and practitioners seek to understand the deeper significance of contemplative practices, psychologies, and philosophies. It may also be vitally important for our culture and species, which are drowning in information, but comparatively lacking in wisdom. In fact, it may be that we are in a race between wisdom and world disaster, between consciousness and catastrophe. We are in great need of wisdom, and of gnostic intermediaries to communicate it.

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***Roger Walsh**, M.D., Ph.D., Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, University of California College of Medicine, Irvine, CA. 92697-1675.