

## Roots of Wisdom and Wings of Enlightenment

Bob Atchley, Sage-ing Guild Conference, October, 2010

Sage-ing International emphasizes, celebrates, and practices spiritual development and wisdom, long recognized as key possibilities in the second half of life. We nurture the individual's spiritual journey, especially the development of a contemplative perspective that allows a type of seeing that fosters wisdom.

In doing this constantly evolving work, we help people learn to balance three dimensions: capacity, level of consciousness, and action.

Capacity means being able to perceive the spiritual elements of experience and manifest wisdom.

There are at least four general types of consciousness: conventional egocentric consciousness, present-moment awareness, non-personal witnessing consciousness, and cosmic consciousness open to experiencing the interrelatedness of everything. All levels of consciousness can be present in the same person at the same time.

The action we are interested in includes things we do to nurture our spiritual development and what we do as sages in the family and in the community. Wise action is rooted in well-practiced ability and higher levels of consciousness.

Capacity, levels of consciousness, and action all benefit from contemplation, which is the opening in our awareness of an enormous non-judgmental space within which we can better see what's going on. Contemplation invites the experience of pure limitless being.

Lest this seem too abstract, here is an example that was given by a middle-aged woman I interviewed:

Periodically I go with a group of friends to our local shelter for the homeless to prepare the evening meal. The people who come through the food line are an amazing mixture. Most are in their 30s and 40s and many have obvious mental problems of one kind or another. Most show the wear and tear of living on the streets. When I first started doing this, I found it difficult to be around that much suffering all in one place. The discomfort I felt made me want to close down, to harden my heart. But I knew somehow that I needed to do just the opposite, to summon all the reserves of compassion I could find and stand there with a heart open to the suffering. Through this I was able to connect with the people being served and realize that we are all being served.

Why do people come to Sage-ing programs? My impression is that nearly all are looking to enhance their capacity for spiritual experience and nurture their intentional spiritual journey, an important root of wisdom. Our programs also help people see the spiritual aspects needed to cope successfully with aging. Some programs deal with obstacles to spiritual growth. People are also drawn to the idea that families, work groups, communities and societies can benefit from the counsel of wise elders. Some programs deal with the role of sage and how to play it.

All these programs have their primary effect within the individual's personal system for adapting to life in an ever-changing situation. Time to share experiences is a vital element of our approach. Sharing expands the range of possibilities beyond what a single individual can conceive. We learn much from each other.

The development of a contemplative, non-personal region of consciousness is an unspoken, underlying prerequisite for what we call sage-ing.

To truly help people with issues of developing spiritually, coping with aging, and offering elder wisdom to the world, we need to understand that it is not enough to lure people out of denial. We must also emphasize the importance of "being while doing" as a challenging practice that must be mastered to some degree before action can have the authenticity it needs to attract social change. The goal is for being to become a full partner with doing.

The central question here is "Which "I" am I bringing to action?" Is it the personal "I", with its web of desires, fears, and claims or is it the non-personal "I" that can see and hear without judgment, ambition, or longing?

Here is an example from a woman in her mid-sixties:

I work as a massage therapist, and I often work with people who are vulnerable. I was trained to approach my clients with a non-judgmental acceptance and attentiveness. It feels to me that when people are on my massage table, they are exposing themselves in more ways than one, in that they are trusting me with their self-conscious and imperfect selves, not just bodily. As I am touching these people, I am often meeting them at a much deeper level than their skin. I experience more than just meeting spirit to spirit or soul to soul; the experience feels more like I am, in fact, not separate from this person but we are part of a whole.

Practice is an essential element of being able to adopt the non-personal, sage-ly vantage point needed to manifest both wisdom and enlightenment, especially at the most difficult times.

Wisdom is one of those words we throw about as if everyone knows what it means. We all know that wisdom is revered, but what is it we revere? In my opinion, we revere the ability to respond to a situation with clarity, compassion, deep understanding, broad knowledge, deep listening, and well-honed interpersonal skills.

Clarity reveals both what is true in a situation and what is needed in terms of action or inaction. Wisdom requires several types of intelligence – intellectual, emotional, bodily and interpersonal. Wisdom also requires experience looking at life from a non-personal point of view. Practicing wisdom improves the capacity to manifest wisdom.

Here is an example from my own experience:

In 1966 I was hired in my first tenure-track academic position by Fred, a bona fide sage in his mid-60s. Fred was my boss for 8 years; then he retired but remained my friend and mentor. He was the least bossy boss, the greatest mentor, and best friend a person could have.

Fred was widely regarded as one of the wisest people around, and his counsel was sought by people from all walks of life. His office was next to mine, and I observed a very interesting mixture of people coming to talk with him, ranging from the building custodians to the President of the University.

After a year of being around Fred in a variety of situations, I realized that he was frequently asked to be wise and that he had been being asked to serve as a sage for many years.

In 1978, as part of my spiritual journey, I went to India to study with the Indian sage Nisargadatta Maharaj, and I returned fully connected with my spiritual center. When I shared these insights with Fred, he nodded and smiled in a knowing way. I said, "You've known this stuff all along." He nodded. "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked. He said, "You weren't ready to hear it yet." He was right. What a wise man he was.

### Wisdom is only heard when it is asked for.

It is important for us to make sure the general public knows that it is okay to ask for wisdom. Sage-ing is not just some New Age idea. It's been around for thousands of years. For most people, asking for wisdom is difficult and requires that the sage create a large space in which the asker can express issues. This kind of space is created by attentive waiting, something most of us need more practice with.

Wisdom is related to spiritual development because both are supported by spiritual practices such as contemplation and meditation. Both spiritual development and increased ability to manifest wisdom can occur without the person's being aware of them. Wisdom is not "something" to "have." It is a capacity that can be developed and become more likely to manifest as the ability is regularly used.

While it is helpful to be generally wise, many situations require specific kinds of life experience to understand them. Circles of sages are more likely than a single sage to be able to manifest the wisdom needed in a situation because the circle usually brings to bear a much wider range of life experiences.

Enlightenment is exquisite freedom and lightness. It is a permanent shift in the center of one's consciousness from inside personal consciousness to outside personal consciousness. Being is the door to enlightenment.

Even though we are filled with being, we may need help in our efforts to see it because our attention is drawn to the world that comes to us through our minds and our senses. Initially, a certain level of quietude helps us see that our inner world is permeated by intense light as well as infinite dark space. Some cultures emphasize the light, others the infinite void. Both are there in us. The experience of being may be an experience that being is no-thing, beyond our ideas of objective truth.

Enlightenment is giving up on the need to understand this in logical, linguistic terms. Enlightenment is a world of paradox. It is good enough to understand it in existential terms. Humor helps. Enlightenment does not speak. It is pure being. Yet it can greatly

increase the clarity with which we experience human personalities, especially our own, and our physical and social worlds.

Here is an example of a liberation experience, related by a man in his early forties:

In my mid-twenties, I attended a leadership training workshop for student affairs workers from many colleges. Of the 150 people there, I knew only a couple, and neither was in my assigned ten-person small group. During the beginning evening, each small group was given the task of doing a group painting, which gave us a little experience of each other.

The next morning, each person in the small group was asked to fill out a form for each of the other people in the group, rating them on a series of personal qualities, both positive and negative. Then the group was to pick a person to start with, discuss that person's qualities and come to consensus about him or her, and then move on to the next person until everyone had been discussed. The person being discussed was to remain in the room but could not speak while he or she was being discussed.

The group selected me as the first focus person, and for the entire three hours allotted to this exercise, I listened with growing amazement as this collection of people with little experience of me argued about what I was like. At first I was disturbed by the vehemence of the negative comments, but the longer the polarized discussion continued, the more detached I felt. At some point I had a deep realization: What these strangers were seeing when they looked at me had little to do with me, what I thought or did, my personal qualities, nothing. I was like an empty screen, and they were projecting their own stuff onto it. I felt liberated by this experience, liberated from what I had seen as a need to conform to my role. I began to look into myself, to see what I was really like, to reconcile the inner man with the outer man, to be more authentic in an existential sense. I see this experience as the point when my conscious spiritual journey began.

Humans are notoriously susceptible to self-delusion. So how do we know that the clarity we think we have is real? This is why most spiritual traditions counsel dialogue with a circle of sages to identify and deal with ego-based self-deception.

The "realized" sage is one whose inner process always leads back to a core of being that is free of personal considerations. Helping seekers find their way to their own core being is a central purpose of a circle of sages.

Sage-ing feeds on our commitment to practice. Practice in this sense is not strict adherence to some external form, although initially external forms of practice such as meditation, ritual prayer, or movement disciplines may be helpful in learning about the workings of the mind and the challenges it represents.

The essence of practice is the habit of coming back to non-personal consciousness and pure being as often as possible. When we have developed the necessary habits, we are liberated to just be, without having to think about it constantly or exert our will about it.

Sage-ing practice is a feedback loop involving at least three elements: the intentional inner journey toward greater and greater connection with one's spiritual center, learning to see the world from a non-personal, contemplative perspective, and learning to decide, act, and respond in the world using this perspective. We can then use these

elements as ways to learn from the results of our decision making. We center, we see things clearly, we act, we observe clearly what happens, then we can incorporate this feedback into our framework for taking our next action. What sets this apart from ordinary learning is its ongoing connection to core being.

So, how do we draw people to this journey of sage-ing? Actually, millions of Americans already see themselves as being on a spiritual journey. This creates a climate for letting people know they are not alone, which in turn may create a pool of folks looking for a next step. Networking is an excellent way to let them know about the Guild. Be relentless in inviting people to our website.

If the sage is to be valued and sought, public consciousness must be raised concerning what sages do for us and the processes needed for identifying and including sages in our lives. What is our responsibility concerning this general consciousness-raising? Is this an area where we might fruitfully partner with other organizations?

Because sage-ing is at its root a process of adopting a contemplative way of being, it requires a level of commitment, discipline, and fortitude that takes it out of the mass market. In my opinion, it is unrealistic to think that sage-ing will become a mass movement. Nevertheless, we can and should continue to offer programs that nurture individuals on their spiritual journeys. These programs have stand-alone integrity in their focus on helping people with their spiritual evolution. The sticky bits have to do with opportunities to serve as sage. Our folks should be encouraged to just do it. Quietly. We communicate through our ways of being. Words may or may not be needed; formal invitations may not be required. What are we learning from the experiences of our members who are trying to serve as sages? Are we soliciting their accounts? Would such accounts enhance our website and draw more people to sage-ing?

Are we thinking in terms of how to establish and nurture Sage-ing Circles as more than a one-time event, or are we leaving the Facilitators to their own devices concerning this? Are we asking for stories of experiences people have had with ongoing Sage-ing Circles? Would these stories draw more people to sage-ing?

Are we thinking about how we might develop processes to form small groups of fully-actualized sages that might serve as counsel to private or public organizations? Establishing and working in these small sage-ing groups might be a next step for the core of people who have been with the sage-ing work for the past twenty years.

Years ago, I heard a speaker say: "In fostering social change, the techniques of the midwife are more effective than the techniques of the engineer. We may be able to ease the birth of the society that is trying to be born, but we cannot closely control the process." So it is with sage-ing. We are trying to help people birth and nurture their inner sage. This is a highly individual matter that lends itself to intimate sharing and

small group process, especially during times of dramatic transition. This is a core of our work.

Another metaphor that for me captures some of what we are trying to do is the notion of riding lessons. To skillfully ride a horse, there are important things to know, such as which side to mount from and whether the horse is trained for bit reining or neck reining. But most of what leads to effective riding is practice. So it is with sage-ing. There are no short-cuts. Programs get us oriented, but we learn to do it mainly by earnestly trying it over and over. Most people prefer to do the ongoing work in the company of supportive peers.

Eventually, we may get to the point where we realize that we have the option of sage-ing in every single moment we are alive and awake. Sage-ing is an even better place to live than it is a place to visit.