



17.

Wisdom



Surprise; here are keys that unlock the secrets of the universe! Not really, but they certainly are necessary guiding principles universally applicable to everyday life. This chapter overflows with wisdom: quotes from various sources I have modified or paraphrased to be more concise. Subjects in alphabetical order:

Advancing Simplicity: “Admirable indeed was the virtue of HŪi. With a single bamboo dish of rice, single gourd dish of drink, and living in his mean narrow lane, while others could not have endured the distress, his joy was unaffected. -----Confucian Analects Book VI, section 9.(1)

That is not a strong fetter, the wise say, which is made of iron, wood, or hemp. But the infatuation and longing for jewels and ornaments, children and wives-----that is a far stronger fetter, which pulls one downward and, though seemingly loose, is hard to remove. This too, the wise cut off. Giving up sensual pleasure, and without any longing, they renounce the world.” -----*Dhammapada XXIV:345-346.*(2)

One day long ago Alexander the Great came upon the philosopher Diogenes, who was so poor, he lived in a barrel. Alexander asked Diogenes “What can I do to help you?” Diogenes replied “Move aside, you are blocking the sun.”-----Diogenes and Alexander; circa 300 BC.(3)

Bad People: A cat, hearing about sick chickens at a certain farm, disguised himself as a doctor and took some medical supplies. Arriving at the farm, he asked the chickens how they were. They replied “Fine, as long as you’re not here.” -----Paraph. Cat and Hens; Æsop’s Fables.4

A cat who caught a rooster wanted to justify devouring him. So she accused him of annoying people by crowing and disturbing their sleep. The rooster defended himself, saying he was helping people wake for work. Then the cat produced another complaint and accused the rooster of offending Nature by his relationship with his sisters. The rooster replied that this too served his master’s interests, since because of this the chickens laid many eggs. “Well!” cried the cat, “I won’t go hungry just because of excuses!” And she ate him.-----Parah. Cat and Cock; Aesop’s Fables; 6th century BC.(5) **Morals:** Wicked people feign righteousness when they cannot victimize openly. Sensible people should know this.

A wolf who swallowed a bone looked everywhere for relief from his predicament. He met a heron who, for a certain fee, agreed to retrieve the bone. So the heron lowered his head into the wolf’s throat, removed the bone, and then claimed his promised fee. The wolf replied “Listen, isn’t it enough to have pulled your head safely from a wolf’s throat? What more do you want?” -----Paraph. Wolf and Heron; Æsop’s Fables.6

One day a wolf stole a sheep and carried it home. But on his way a lion crossed his path and took the sheep away. The wolf complained to the lion: “You have no right to take my property!” The lion replied sarcastically : “You came by it honestly yourself; a gift from a friend, no doubt?” -----Paraph. Wolf and Lion; Æsop’s Fables.(7) **Morals:** You cannot expect good from bad people; thieves have no honor.

“Entangled by the bonds of hate, he who seeks his own happiness by inflicting pain on others, is never delivered from hatred.”-----*Dhammapada XXI:291.*(8)

Changing Fortunes: Seeing an ox working hard in the fields, a heifer expressed sympathy to him about his plight. But suddenly, a solemn religious procession came by. Someone unyoked the ox, while another seized the heifer and prepared to slaughter her as a sacrifice. Seeing this the ox smiled and said “Oh heifer, that’s why

you had no work to do. For you were intended to be sacrificed.” ---Paraph. Heifer and Ox.(9) **Morals:** Things can dramatically change; make yourself useful.

A wild donkey saw a domestic donkey grazing in plenty of sunshine. He went to compliment her on her plumpness and the pasture she enjoyed. But moments later he saw her loaded with a burden and followed by an ass-driver, who beat her with a club. So he called out: “I don’t congratulate you anymore. For you pay a high price for your abundance.” -----Paraph. Wild Ass and Domestic Ass; Æsop’s Fables.(10) **Moral:** Some benefits are too costly; be thankful.

Discernment: “If it walks like a duck, looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, I call it a duck.”-----
Origin uncertain.11

“Easily seen is the fault of others, but one’s own fault is difficult to see. Like chaff one winnows another’s faults, but hides one’s own, even as a crafty fowler hides behind sham branches.”-----*Dhammapada XVIII:252.*(12)

Encouragement: “An orchid in a deep forest sends out its fragrance even if no one is around to appreciate it.” “Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but rising every time we fall.” “Transport a handful of earth every day and you will make a mountain.”-----Confucius.13-15

“Things without all remedy should be without regard; what’s done is done.”-----
Shakespeare’s Macbeth Act 3 Scene 2.(16)

Expectations: A donkey and a cockerel were feeding together when a lion attacked the donkey. The cockerel crowed loudly and the lion fled, for lions are afraid of the sound of a cock crowing. The donkey, thinking the lion fled because of him, quickly rushed after him. After pursuing the lion farther than the distance where a cock’s crow can be heard, the lion turned round and pounced. Dying, the donkey brayed: “What an unfortunate, stupid fellow I am!” -----Ass, Cock, and Lion; Æsop’s Fables.17 **Moral:** Don’t overestimate your abilities.

Some fishermen were retrieving a large dragnet. Since it was so heavy they celebrated, imagining that their catch was extraordinary. But after pulling the dragnet ashore, they found no fish. Instead, it was filled with stones. The fishermen were deeply upset because of the disappointment to their heightened expectations. -----Paraph. Fishermen and Stones; Æsop’s Fables.(18) **Morals:** Never delude yourself into always expecting the same success, considering how changeable life is. There is never such good weather that storms cannot follow.

“In some cases, leaves spring but the plant never flowers. In other cases they flower, but no fruit is subsequently produced.” -----Confucian Analects Book IX, section 21.(19) **Morals:** You must not be complacent over past success; you must persevere until the end. Never trust anyone’s current accomplishments; they must prove long term consistency.

Flattery: A raven found some meat and flew into a tree with it. A fox saw him and wanted the meat for himself. So he said to the raven “Of all birds you are the most beautiful. Such elegant proportions, so stately and sleek. You ideally should be king of all birds. If you only had a voice you would surely be king.” The raven, wanting to demonstrate his voice, dropped the meat to sing. So the fox grabbed the meat. -----Paraph. Raven and Fox; Æsop’s Fables.(20) **Morals:** Guard against foolish behavior; flattery is deceptive manipulation.

Greed/Dissatisfaction: A donkey carrying a woodpile was crossing a bog. He slipped and fell. Unable to arise, he groaned and wailed. The frogs in the bog heard this moaning and said: “What sort of noise would you make if you lived here as long as we have? You, who have only fallen in for a moment?” ----Paraph. Ass and Frogs; Æsop’s Fables.(21) **Morals:** Don’t be a wimp, complainer, or impatient; think about how others feel.

Some flies found spilled honey and began eating it. It was such a sweet feast that they could not stop. But their feet became stuck into it so that they couldn’t take flight. As they began to suffocate, they said “How wretched we are; we are dying for a moment’s pleasure.” ----Paraph. Flies; Æsop’s Fables.22

A man’s hen laid golden eggs. Believing that her innards were solid gold, he killed her and found that she was exactly like other hens. He wanted instant riches, and was thus deprived of even the profit he had. -----Paraph. Hen That Laid Golden Eggs; Æsop’s Fables.23

A lion, having discovered a sleeping hare, was about to eat it. But just then, he saw a deer. So he left the hare and chased the deer. The hare, awoken by the noise, took flight. The lion, having followed the deer for some distance, yet unable to catch it, went back for the hare, but it had gone. ----- Paraph. Lion and Hare; Æsop’s Fables.24

A widow’s hen laid an egg every day. She imagined that if she fed the hen more barley it would lay twice a day. So she doubled the hen’s ration. But the hen became sluggish and couldn’t even lay one egg per day. -----Paraph. Woman and Hen; Æsop’s Fables.25

Human Nature: A lion fell in love with a ploughman’s daughter and asked for her hand in marriage. Unable to either give his daughter to a ferocious beast or refuse him because he feared him so much, the ploughman thought up the following idea. As the lion continued to press him, he told him that he deemed him worthy to be his daughter’s husband. But he could give her to him on one condition: that he would pull out his teeth and claws, for they terrified the young girl. The lion willingly resigned himself to this sacrifice because he loved her. But no sooner had he done this than the ploughman had nothing but contempt for him, and, when he presented himself, drove him away with many blows. -----Paraph. Æsop’s Fables; Amorous Lion and Ploughman.(26) **Morals:** Most people are only nice because they are at a disadvantage; do not be trusting.

A local charcoal burner noticed that a fuller had established himself nearby. So he visited him and urged him to come live with him. He wanted to save on expenses by sharing a single dwelling. But the fuller said “Absolutely not! For what I will clean you will blacken with soot.” -----Paraph. Charcoal Burner and Fuller; Æsop’s Fables.27

One day, enmity broke out between the dogs and wolves. The dogs elected a Greek as their general. But he was slow to engage in battle, despite the wolves’ violent intimidation. He said “Understand why I deliberately avoid engagement. It is because the wolves, on one hand, are all the same race and color. But our soldiers have very varied habits, and each one is proud of his own country. Even their colors are not uniform: some are black, some russet, others white or ashen. I cannot lead into battle those who are disharmonious and dissimilar.” -----Paraph. Wolves and Dogs at War; Æsop’s Fables.(28) **Moral:** You cannot unite contradictory interests or natures.

A hunter was looking for lion tracks. He asked a woodcutter if he had seen a lion’s footprints, and where the beast’s lair was. “I will show you the lion himself,” said the woodcutter. The hunter, teeth chattering and trembling with fear, said “I’m only looking for the trail, not the actual lion.” -----Paraph. Cowardly Hunter and Woodcutter; Æsop’s Fables.(29) **Moral:** People often present a false image.

A lion wanted to eat a bull, and decided to use trickery. He told the bull that he sacrificed sheep, and invited him to feast, so he could kill him when he was relaxing. The bull accepted the invitation but, seeing huge spits and giant cauldrons, but no sheep, quickly departed. The lion asked why, since he was hospitable

and did no harm. The bull said “I see no sign of slaughtered sheep, but plainly see that you made preparations for dining on beef.” -----Paraph. Lion and Bull; Æsop’s Fables.(30) **Moral:** Strangers always have their own self-interests in mind; beware.

“Day by day, what you choose, think, and do is what you become.”-----Heraclitus; Greek philosopher; 535-475 BC.(31)

“Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once -----
---Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar Act 2 Scene 2.(32)

Justice: “Not by passing arbitrary judgments does one become just; a wise man is he who investigates both right and wrong. He who does not judge others arbitrarily, but passes judgment impartially according to the truth, that sagacious man is a guardian of law and is called just.”-----*Dhammapada XIX:256-257.*(33)

Loyalty: An ass and a fox made a pact to hunt together, and sallied forth. But a lion appeared in their path. Hoping to save himself, the fox approached the lion and offered to entrap the ass on the lion’s behalf. The lion promised that, if the fox did this, he would let him go. So the fox led the ass towards a hunting pit, into which he fell and was trapped. As soon as he knew the ass was secured, the lion ate the fox, saving the ass for later. --
-----Paraph. Ass, Fox, and Lion; Æsop’s Fables.34

A visitor arrived at a bird-catcher’s house. Since the host had no extra food, he fetched his own partridge. As he was about to kill her, she denounced his ingratitude: “Have I not been most useful in calling birds of my own tribe and delivering them to you? Yet you want to kill me?” -----Paraph. Bird-catcher and Partridge; Æsop’s Fables.35

Making Changes: Two frogs were neighbors. One lived in a remote pond; the other in a stagnant pool on the road. The one from the pond advised the other to come live near her: “You’ll enjoy a much safer, better life here” she said. But the frog on the road would not be persuaded. “It would too much effort to uproot myself from where I have always called home” she said. Yet one day a chariot passed along the track and crushed her.-
-----Paraph. Neighbor Frogs; Æsop’s Fables.(36) **Moral:** Changes may be absolutely necessary.

“The perfecting of oneself is the fundamental base of all progress and moral development.”-----
--Confucius.(37) On the bathing-tub of T’ang, the following words were engraved: “If you can renovate yourself, do so from day to day. Yea, let there be daily renovation.” -----Confucius’s Great Learning Chapter II, verse 1.(38)

‘Cultivating the person depends on rectifying the mind,’ is thus illustrated:-----If a man be under the influence of passion, sorrow, or distress, his conduct will be incorrect. When our mind is absent we look and cannot see, hear yet not understand, eat and taste not. Therefore, cultivating the person depends on rectifying the mind. -----Confucius’s Great Learning Chapter VII.(39)

Natures: Hearing some cicadas sing, a donkey was charmed by their harmony and desired their talent. He asked: “what do you eat that gives you such a beautiful song?” “The dew,” they replied. Thereafter the donkey waited for the dew and eventually starved to death. -----Paraph. Ass and Cicadas; Æsop’s Fables.40

A monkey perched in a lofty tree watched fishermen casting their dragnet into a river, and studied their actions. Later, the fishermen went away for lunch. Then the monkey, climbing down from the tree, tried to mimic their actions. But as soon as he grabbed the net he became entangled and nearly drowned. -----
Paraph. Monkey and Fishermen; Æsop’s Fables.41

A turtle begged an eagle to teach him to fly. An eagle pointed out that he wasn’t meant to fly. But the turtle only pleaded more intensely. So the eagle took him in his talons, flew into the air, and let him go.

The turtle fell onto rocks and was smashed to pieces. -----Paraph. Tortoise and Eagle; Æsop's Fables.(42)

Moral: Know your nature.

Opinions: A famished fox, seeing grape clusters hanging atop a vine, wanted some, but could not reach them. So he went away, saying "Those are spoiled." -----Paraph. Fox and Grapes; Æsop's Fables.(43) **Moral:** Opinions on what is valuable are often dishonest, by resting on inability to get what you want, or unwillingness to expend effort.

A father and son walked their old donkey to market on a summer day. They overheard some passersby say, "See those foolish people walking when one of them could be riding the donkey." Not wanting to appear foolish, the father mounted the donkey and they went on. Not long after another onlooker remarked, "See that lazy lout making that youngster trudge along." Upon hearing this, father and son exchanged places, yet still did not satisfy the townspeople who said, "Look at that young man riding and the old man walking in this heat."

The father then joined his son on the donkey. After riding a short distance, another passerby exclaimed, "See that poor donkey carrying those two people; they should be carrying the donkey instead." So the man and boy tied the donkey's legs to a pole and proceeded to carry the donkey. They went along amid roaring laughter. -----Paraph. Man, Boy, and Donkey; Æsop's Fables.(44) **Morals:** you cannot please everybody, and will be censured regardless. Don't be discouraged by unjust criticisms. Please all and you will please none.

"As solid rocks unshaken by wind, so are the wise unshaken by praise or blame."-----

Dhammapada VI:81.(45)

"It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness."-----Tolstoy, Kreuter Sonata.46

Our Universe/World: There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than there are dreamt of in your philosophy. -----Shakespeare's Hamlet Act 1 Scene 5.(47)

The heaven now before us is only this bright shining spot; but when viewed in its inexhaustible extent, the sun, moon, stars, and constellations are suspended in it, and all things are overspread by it. The earth before us is but a handful of soil, but when regarded in its breadth and thickness, it sustains mountains like the Hwâ and Yo, without feeling their weight, and contains the rivers and seas, without their leaking away. The mountain before us appears only a stone; but when contemplated in all its vast size, we see how the grass and trees are produced on it, and birds and beasts dwell on it, and precious things which men treasure are found on it. The water before us appears but a ladleful; yet extending our view to its unfathomable depths, the largest tortoises, iguanas, iguanodons, dragons, fishes, and turtles are produced in them; wealth abounds in them. -----Confucius's Doctrine of the Mean Chapter XXVI. Verse 9.(48) **Morals:** Our perspective can be utterly inaccurate; we must see the big picture.

Pride: A talentless kithara-player sang from morning to night in a house with thickly plastered walls. As the walls echoed with his sounds he imagined that he sang very beautifully. He so overestimated himself that he decided to perform in a theatre. But he sang so badly that he was driven off stage by people throwing rotten tomatoes. -----Paraph. Kithara-player; Æsop's Fables.49

Intoxicated with oil, a lamp threw out a vivid light, boasting that it was more brilliant than the sun. But a zephyr blew past and extinguished it. Someone relit it and said: Light up lamp, yet be assured that the light of the stars is never eclipsed." -----Paraph. Lamp; Æsop's Fables.50

"Though a man have abilities as admirable as the duke of Châu, yet is proud and niggardly, his abilities are unworthy of consideration." -----Confucian Analects Book VIII, section 11.(51)

Right Conduct: “Superior men wish to be slow in speech and earnest in conduct.” -----Confucian Analects Book IV, section 24.(52)

“Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not contrary to propriety; make no movement contrary to propriety.” -----Confucian Analects Book XII, excerpt from section 1.(53) Consider the statue of three monkeys covering mouth, eyes, and ears: See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

“Excellent are well-trained mules, thoroughbred Sindhu horses, and noble tusker elephants. But better still is the man who has subdued himself.”-----*Dhammapada XXIII:322*.(54)

Social Issues: One day, the donkeys, tired of suffering and carrying heavy burdens, sent representatives to Zeus, asking him to limit their workload. Wanting to show that this was impossible, Zeus told them that they would be delivered from their misery only when they could make a river from their piss. The donkeys thought he was serious and, from then until now, whenever they see donkey piss anywhere they stop to piss too. -----Paraph. Asses Appealing to Zeus; Æsop’s Fables.(55) **Morals:** Authorities are sometimes useless; some people’s life situation cannot be changed.

The monkey, having danced in the assembly of animals and earned their approval, was crowned king. Yet one day, the fox saw a snare baited with meat. He told the monkey, saying that he found treasure, which he guarded for his highness. The fox then urged him to take it. The monkey lunged upon it, and was entrapped. After accusing the fox of trickery, the fox said “Monkey, you want to reign over all animals, yet you’re a fool!” -----Paraph. Fox and Monkey Elected King; Æsop’s Fables.(56) **Morals:** Popularity is often worse than meaningless; beware of pride and overestimating your self-worth.

Tsze-kung asked: “What do you say of a man who is loved by everyone in his neighborhood?” The Master replied: “We may not for that approve of him.” “And what about him who is hated by everyone in his neighborhood?” The Master said: We may not conclude that he is bad. It is better than either case that the righteous in the neighborhood love him, and the bad hate him.” ----- Confucian Analects Book XIII, section 24.(57) **Moral:** Popular opinion is below rubbish.

In summer a lion and a wild boar went to drink at a little spring. They argued over who should drink first, which escalated into a life-and-death struggle. But stopping to catch their breath, they noticed vultures waiting nearby to devour whichever one fell first. So, putting aside their hostility, they said “It would be better to become friends than be food for vultures. -----Paraph. Lion and Wild Boar; Æsop’s Fables.(58) **Moral:** Likeminded people must unite for success.

“When people can walk away from you, stop begging them to stay. Let them walk.” “Never waste your feelings on people that don’t value you.” An empty seat is far better than having a wrong person sitting in it.” -----T. D. Jakes.59

Understanding/Misunderstanding: A man broke into a beekeeper’s abode and stole honey and honeycombs. When the beekeeper returned and saw the empty hives he stopped to examine them. But the bees, flying back home from foraging and finding him there, attacked and stung him terribly. “Wretched creatures” he exclaimed, “You let the person who stole your combs escape with impunity and mercilessly persecute me who takes care of you!” -----Paraph. Beekeeper; Æsop’s Fables.60

A diviner sat plying his trade in the agora. Suddenly, someone rushed up and said that his house was broken into and ransacked. The diviner leapt up in consternation and ran home, desperate to see what happened. A passerby who saw him running called out: “Hey there! You who pride yourself on foretelling the fu-

ture for others! Can't you foresee what will happen to yourself?"-----Paraph. Diviner; Æsop's Fables.(61)

Moral: Fortune tellers, mediums, and ESP readers are fake.

The gardener's dog fell down a well. Wanting to save her, the gardener went down the well himself. But the dog, imagining that the gardener would push her down even further, turned and bit him. The gardener, in pain, climbed out, saying "Why should I put myself out to save the beast when she wants to perish?"-----Paraph. Gardener and Dog; Æsop's Fables.(62) **Morals:** Try to make sure that you are not misunderstood; don't be ungrateful or unjust; avoid the ungrateful; people can be incredibly ignorant.

While walking along one day a man and a lion argued over who was stronger. Just then they passed a stone statue of a man strangling a lion. "See, we are stronger than you" said the man. But the lion laughed and said "If lions could make statues, you would always see men subdued by lions." -----Paraph. Man and Lion Travelling Together; Æsop's Fables.(63) **Morals:** Beware of what you were taught; whether from home, school, the media, or popular opinion; truth is established by testing.

Travelling through a desert, a man came upon a solitary woman who kept her eyes lowered. "Who are you" he asked. "Truth" she replied. "And why have you left town to inhabit the desert?" She replied: "Because, long ago, lies were only known to a few, but now they are everywhere— with everyone you speak." -----Paraph. Traveler and Truth; Æsop's Fables.(64) **Moral:** Complete truth is extremely rare.

A trumpeter who summoned the assembly of troops was captured by the enemy. He cried: "Kill me not, comrades, without consideration or reason. For I never killed anyone." But someone replied: "All the more reason for you to die, since, unable to fight yourself, you arouse everyone else to combat. -----Trumpeter; Æsop's Fables.65

"By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is bitterest."-----Confucius.66

"Better than a thousand useless words is one useful word, hearing which one attains peace."-----*Dhammapada VI:81.*(66)

Values: A vixen criticized a lioness for only ever bearing one child. "Only one" she said, "but a lion." -----Paraph. Lioness and Vixen; Æsop's Fables.(67) **Moral:** Quality over quantity.

The birds consulted together to choose a king. The peacock demanded to be named king by virtue of his beauty. The birds were about to vote for him when the jackdaw cried: "But if you reign, what help could you give when eagles come hunting for us?" -----Paraph. Peacock and Jackdaw; Æsop's Fables.68

A stag saw his reflection in the water. He loved his fine antlers, but was discontented with his legs, which he thought looked scrawny. Suddenly a lion sprang out and chased him. The stag fled rapidly and ran a great distance, for the stag's advantage is his legs. As long as they were in open ground, the stag easily outdistanced the lion. But they entered a wooded area and the stag's antlers became entangled in branches, so that he was caught by the lion. Nearing death, the stag said "How unfortunate I am! My legs, which I denigrated, could have saved me, whereas my prided antlers caused my death! -----Stag at Spring and Lion; Æsop's Fables.(69) **Morals:** Since supposed friends could be enemies and supposed enemies could be friends, test everyone; beware in valuing wrong things and neglecting right things; be aware that others may have bad values.

Work: In winter the ants were drying their damp grain. A hungry cicada asked them for something to eat.

The ants replied: “Why didn’t you store up provisions during the summer?” The cicada replied: “I didn’t have time for that; I was singing melodiously.” The ants mocked: “Well, since you sang in summer you can dance in winter.” -----Cicada and Ants; Æsop’s Fables.(70)

A turtle and jackrabbit argued over who was swifter. So they agreed to race. Now the overconfident jackrabbit allowed himself to daydream. Consequently he fell asleep. But the turtle, well aware of his slowness, never stopped and, overtaking the sleeping rabbit, arrived first and won the contest. ----Paraph. Tortoise and Hare; Æsop’s Fables.71

“If you shoot for the stars and hit the moon, it’s okay. But you’ve got to shoot for something. Lots of people don’t even shoot.”-----Confucius.72

“I wasted time; now doth time waste me.”-----Shakespeare’s Richard II Act 5 Scene 5.(73)

X-amples: “If for company you find a wise and prudent friend who leads a righteous life, you should, overcoming all impediments, keep his company joyously and mindfully. If for company you cannot find a wise and prudent friend who leads a righteous life, then, like a king who leaves behind a conquered kingdom, or a lone elephant in the elephant forest, you should go your way alone. Better to live alone; there is no fellowship with a fool. Live alone and do no evil; be carefree like an elephant in the elephant forest.”-----*Dhammapada XXIII: 328-330.*(74)

“How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world.”-----Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice Act 5 Scene 1.(75)

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