

Art of Living : A Self-managing Instrument Therefor

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The author writes:

*This printing format is unusual
and, therefore, deserves
a word of explanation.*

*This is based on reading research.
One finding of reading research is
that understanding becomes easier
when we read in terms of thought-units.
Since a phrase is the smallest thought unit,
researchers have noted that fast readers
have the habit of reading in terms of phrases,
though they may not be aware of it.*

*When we read thus for the first time,
we may find it odd, even annoying.
Once, however, we see the logic of,
and develop mastery over,
the technique of phrase reading,
we tend to ask:*

*Why did not my teachers
give me the benefit of this technique
of speedy comprehension
when I was in school?*

*What a difference it would have made
for my reading ease and reading outcome?
(The fact is many teachers
are not updating themselves
on reading research.)*

To live well, to live well in every sense,
and to live well for all time:
that is the aim of most of us.

The art of living
makes it possible
to achieve this aim.

This is saying the obvious.

To achieve this holistic aim,
many have provided,
and are providing
significant pointers.

This special volume
of *The Vedanata Kesari*
on *The Art of Living*
is one proof.

It carries scores of rich ideas.

This also is obvious.

The challenge is
how to avail of this information,
this knowledge and this wisdom,
and how to operationalise it
to our advantage.

The art of living
lies largely in
the joy we have in holistic living.
That joy leads us to
proactive steps,
to avail of the theory and practice,
the science and art of living.

Art refers to practice
while science refers to theory.
Science provides potential benefit
Art provides actual benefit.
Both are necessary
but the art part is essential.
Our problem often is
not information or knowledge.
It is understanding, alertness
and the resulting action.
How much we know,
how well we know
is necessary but not sufficient.
How relevant it is,



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how well we apply:
that matters a great deal.

So we ask ourselves:
How is our state of science
and, more importantly,
how is our state of art
vis-a-vis our living?

Both states of knowing and doing
may be good;
but unless they are good enough,
our state of holistic well-being
may not be good enough.

From time to time, therefore,
we have to subject ourselves
to a sort of audit.
We have to be asked
pointed questions like
the following:

*In many aspects of living,
where are you now?
And where are you headed?*

In asking these questions,
there are three options:

1. Someone else asks us these questions
on a one on one basis.
2. Someone else asks us these questions
in a group situation.
3. We ask these questions ourselves.

The first approach is uncomfortable.
The second is almost threatening.
The third is safe.

Even though expert help
is available there,
we tend to avoid
the first two approaches.
If forced into one of them,
we tend to play games.

At best, we go through the motions.

Our hope and opportunity then
is in the third approach.
We can work out a way by which
we can address these and similar questions
to ourselves,
and in private.

We can get into
a retreat-like situation.

'A retreat-like' because
we avoid a human agency.

We now, however, have a need
for a tool to facilitate the process.
And this can be in the form of an instrument,
a self-managing instrument,
an instrument that will facilitate us
to step up our awareness
of our blocks and our opportunities.

A Major Block

For a healthy, productive, peaceful living,
we need a range of behaviour.
From that range,
we can choose the one
that is appropriate to the situation.

What often happens is
that many of us have
a set pattern of behaviour,
a behaviour that is almost automated.

We are not aware
that our behaviour in a situation
is an unconscious and fixed 'choice'.
When this is inappropriate,
if others point this out,
we tend to defend it, rationalize it,
and we say 'that is my nature'.

What is needed is the awareness
that we have options in life,
that our current option is only one of them,
and we have unconsciously 'chosen' it,
that we are not condemned to continue it,
that we can release ourselves from it;
and to do that we need an instrument
that will facilitate this awareness.

Here is such an instrument.

And the instrument
outlined below
I have used myself;
I have also shared it
with those interested;
and for several years now,
and it works.

I have a preference
for voluntary simplicity.

My instrument, therefore,
 will be just a graph paper.
 We can draw a square or a rectangle.
 We divide it into four parts or quadrants.
 We then plot to represent answers
 to the questions:
 In which quadrant or quadrants
 we are operative?
 And to what extent?
 We ask other appropriate questions.

Once explained,
 this instrument looks simple
 to understand and apply.
 And it is as well.

The Power of Options

This instrument helps us
 to become aware of our current status
 and also to avail of the power of options.
 There may be very many options
 For purpose of practicality.
 we are taking just four options.
 Each quadrant in the grid is an option.
 We may operate in one quadrant,
 or more than one quadrant.
 Even within a quadrant,
 we will have options in respect of degrees.
 We may have more or less or in between.

Where this grid helps us is
 to identify where we are
 currently positioned;
 and how fixated we are.

Having done the positioning,
 we can ask any number of questions.
 The options are many indeed,
 here too.
 Again, this will vary
 from person to person.
 In other words,
 this is a friendly, flexible tool.
 that can be tailored to each individual.

Once we have established
 our current status,
 we have the freedom and flexibility
 to ask our own questions.

The following questions
 are just indicative.
 The crucial point is
 to think reflectively,
 to turn the searchlight on ourselves.
 The crucial point is
 to think to a purpose.
 The general purpose is to live well.
 The specific purpose will be
 in respect of our area of concern
 that affects the quality of our living.

The instrument helps us
 to answer questions like these:

In any specified area,
 relating to living and life,
 where am I now?
 How long have I been there?
 Am I moving or static?
 If moving,
 in what direction am I moving?
 Does the state and the direction
 hurt or help my holistic well-being?
 If they help,
 can I consciously consolidate
 and probably accelerate?
 If they hurt,
 do I want to continue to get hurt?
 Can I decelerate or change directions?
 Have I options?
 How can I avail of those options?
 And thereby improve the quality of my living?

In other words,
 this headstart instrument helps us
 become aware
 of our *current position* or location,
 of our *current status*—static or dynamic,
 of our *current direction*—helpful or hurtful,
 of our *current tempo*—slow or fast enough,
 and thereby helps us
 consider options,
 take decisions,
 and evolve strategies
 for a rising quality of living.

There are many aspects
 to the art of living
 and this instrument

can be used
for any of these aspects.

The area of reflection
or self interrogation
will vary from person to person
and occasion to occasion.

In this paper, therefore,
I take for illustration
some common areas.

Education for the Art of Living

What is the essence of education?

It is active learning.

It is learning to move
from where we are
to where we can be.

It is learning the relevant.

It is learning to learn.

It is learning to do the appropriate.

It is learning to do better and better.

It is learning to be
fair to all concerned.

It is going for
the welfare of the many
the happiness of the many.

May all be happy.

Schooling leads to a qualification.

Education leads to a better life.

It is good to have both.

It is education that we need most
for mastering the art of living.

Circumstances can limit our schooling;

They cannot limit our learning.

Mark Twain once observed:

*I do not allow my schooling
to interfere with my education.*

Many of our schooled people
cannot say the same
with confidence;

They limit themselves

to a point in time;

they limit themselves

to a single source.

Where are we personally situated?

This grid can help answer the question.

The Rig Vedic saying is:

*Let noble thoughts come to us
from every side.* (Rig Veda 1-89-1)

Browning Says:

*What do they know of England
who only England know?*

In other words,

if we mean well with ourselves,
we should draw as much from the past
as from the present,
as much from the East as from the West.
Only then education for the art of living
will be comprehensive.

In the suggested retreat,
the grid will help us ask questions like these:
In which quadrant I find myself in?
To what degree? To what extent?
By holding to that position,
am I hurting myself?
Can I not move to more helpful quadrants?
Can I be open to all the knowledge there is?

	To the present	To the past
Open		
Not open		

G 1

	To the West	To the East
Open		
Not open		

G 2

Tenable Knowledge

It is one thing
to be open to knowledge,
regardless of the source.
It is another to make sure
it is tenable knowledge.
If the knowledge we have
is not tenable,

acting on that knowledge
will hurt our well-being.
That is why one thinker said:
What I don't know hurts.
Even more, what I know, doesn't.

It becomes necessary, therefore,
to keep checking
what knowledge I have
and what part of it
is either not tenable
or not tenable any more.

Subject:

	I know	I don't know
Tenable		
Non-tenable		

G 3

On this subject, what do I know?
Of what I know
what is tenable?

Am I holding on to only the tenable?
Am I jettisoning that which is not tenable?

The Kural's insight is:

*epporul yaar yaar vaayi kezhipinum
apporul meiporul kanbadarivu.*

(From whatever source we gain knowledge,
wisdom is knowing what is true or tenable).

Dynamic Knowledge

We can move on then
to the next related area,
namely, knowledge in action.

Knowledge does not make for results.
*Tenable knowledge in action
makes for results.*

What matters is not so much what we know
What matters is what we do.

Another area of reflection, therefore, is:
My behavior vs tenable knowledge I have
on a subject that affects my living.

If knowledge in action is important
for our quality of living
we should realise

the phenomenon of knowledge.
Knowledge is exploding.
It is increasing
at an exponential rate.
It is unsafe to be uninformed.
I find it difficult to catch up with it.
All the more reason we should
get into the habit of learning
consciously *and* systematically.
In the areas of our concern,
are we learning consciously,
are we learning systematically?

This is a grim phenomenon.

Much of our learning,
except probably in respect of our work,
happens to be incidental learning.
Our schooling helps us to learn;
it rarely helps us to learn to learn.
Even when it does,
it is in respect of technological work
and not of holistic living.

Subject :

	I learn	
	Consciously	Not consciously
I learn systematically		
I learn not systematically		

G 4

Holistic Well-being

Life can be lived whole
or in part.
When we live in part,
life becomes unbalanced
and therefore hurtful.

The art of living
includes
the physical, the emotional,
the intellectual, the economic,
the social and the spiritual
well-being.
They all go together;
the inner and the outer well-being

go together.
 In fact, the inner well-being precedes the outer well-being.
 That is probably why
 Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly urged:
God first; world next.

The worldly wise say:
 When you are tired and retired,
 you can look at the inner.

Where is the truth—for us?
 Who can say—except us?
 To get prepared
 to answer such questions
 we can use a grid
 like the one that follows
 and ask questions like:

	The outer Life	The inner Life
We look at		
We don't look at		

G 5

In what quadrant
 I spend most of my energy now?
 And to what extent?
 Is the current position/direction
 helping or hurting my well-being?

Am I looking at
 the totality of life
 or only a small part of it?
 Is my life lopsided?
 Unbalanced? Incomplete?

Who wins?

To further illustrate the instrumental
 Let us move from the general,
 to the specific.
 Let us take just
 one dominant aspect
 of the art of living,
 namely,
 our position vis-a-vis others,
 our interpersonal relationship.

Where do we find ourselves
 in the accompanying grid?
 In a number of repeat situations?
 Is it: I win—You win?
 Or is it: I lose—You lose?
 Or other?
 Our whole approach to life
 and the resulting quality of living
 will revolve around our stand.
 And we need to examine it
 from time to time.
 And this grid helps.

	I win	I lose
You win		
You lose		

G 6

A Basic Decision

An instrument is only an instrument.
 It helps once a basic decision is there.
 The basic decision is:

*Living is an art, a fine art,
 and I choose to practise it,
 intelligently, consciously, systematically
 and joyously.*

This basic decision to become alive
 has to become an urgency;
 and an urgency arrives
 when there is a recognition
 of an irrepressible fact of life,
 which can be stated as follows:

*When we continue to do
 what we have been doing,
 the way we have been doing,
 we continue to get
 what we have been getting;
 and, in fact,
 in a fast changing world,
 we may not even get
 what we have been getting!*

There are two related phenomena.
 One is that many of us are
 unconscious victims

of hurtful patterns.

The other is that
even when we are aware,
we think the suffering is inevitable.
We do not concede that we can shift
to a saner, safer position.
And we need a wake-up call,
an acceptable wake-up call
from an impersonal agency.

Instruments like this can prove to be
such-like agency.

Once we get the hang of it,
this instrument can be personalized
and tailored to our needs.

To make a conscious shift
from where we are
to where we can well be
calls for more than the will to live well.
All factors may not be controllable by us
All facilities may not be available to us.
The opportunity is to avail of the available,
to control the controllable.
There is good news.
The good news is that what is possible
is significantly large.

This-like Instruments

The masters and the mystics
of all places and ages,
as the scientists
of yesterday and today,
have been sharing
their intuitions and experiences,
their findings and insights on life and living.

We can use many of them
to live well
in the holistic sense.

To do so, we need
to get into the habit
of reflecting,
preferably in a retreat setup.

In such a setup,
when we use instruments like these,
we are able to make
living a fine art.



PAPAD A BOON TO FARIDA

Salmabanu used to live in Sultanpura area of Jhagadia, Gujarat. Her parents' house was nearby. Salmabanu made supplementary income by making *papad* in which her sister Farida also helped. Her husband was unemployed and the family was maintained from the income of Salmabanu herself, and their mother, who used to be anxious about the plight of the family. Observing all these things in her sister's family young Farida developed disgust for marriage.

Farida, while assisting her elder sister, registered her name in the Papad Centre in 1990 and worked for three years. She carried out her assignment with extraordinary care, regularity and zeal. When the woman working in the Papad Centre as supervisor left, that task was assigned to Faridabanu on a permanent basis.

In spite of meagre education Faridabanu was hard working and possessed robust common sense. She was inquisitive by nature and always eager to learn new things. Gradually she began to handle the office work also. Over and above her assigned duty of making payments to women she started helping in marketing work. At her home also she was treated with much respect.

She had lost her father when she was a child. Her mother brought up the children by selling ice and making small earnings. At present Farida earns Rs.2000 per month and her earning plays an important role in the maintenance of the family. Faridabanu has made some saving and has invested Rs.2000 in fixed deposit. In spite of economic betterment she refuses marriage and prefers a life of dignity and respect in view of the experience of the married life of her elder sister.

—Courtesy SEWA RURAL, GUJARAT.