

JAN - MAR 2018

THE ACROPOLITAN

A Magazine on Philosophy, Culture & Volunteering



FEATURE

EMPOWERING REAL CHANGE: PHILOSOPHY & ART

KINDFULNESS: THE NEED OF THE HOUR

DARING TO DREAM OF A
NEW AND BETTER WORLD

SCALING AN INNER SUMMIT

SCHEDULE OF PUBLIC EVENTS

NA
NEW ACROPOLIS





PHILOSOPHY

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THE ACROPOLITAN

In Ancient Greece, the Acropolis referred to the sacred centre, that lay higher than the rest of the city. It was a place of inspiration; a bridge that enabled citizens to connect to the divine, evoking the expression of the higher human virtues. Deriving inspiration from its purpose, The Acropolitan Magazine serves as a tribute to every citizen yearning for these higher principles in all aspects of Life: **Truth, Beauty, Justice, Goodness.**



PHILOSOPHY when practical, helps us to know and improve ourselves. It is a way of life, not an intellectual attitude, committed to the best aspirations of humanity.



CULTURE broadens our understanding of life, and fosters a spirit of mutual respect and solidarity, strengthening human dignity and facilitating harmonious coexistence.



VOLUNTEERING is the natural expression of a spirit of union with life and humanity, which manifests in the practice of values such as unselfishness, commitment and striving for the common good.

FROM THE EDITORIAL DESK

Dear Reader,

As we turn the leaf to 2018, it is a good time to reflect on the underlying goals that fuel the completion of the countless items on our ever growing list of To-dos. Are we simply running, aimlessly trapped in the busy doing of a variety of daily tasks?

A few amongst us seek a larger purpose, by which to make life more meaningful...and dare to seek answers to our most fundamental human questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the role I am supposed to play?

To begin to answer these questions is to embark upon the most exciting life-long adventure, to scale our innermost summit, in order to reveal the true light of the human spirit. On this summit lies the virtue of courage that enables us to dare to dream of a new and better world despite our challenging circumstances. It is there that we find perseverance and determination, by which we empower ourselves to bring about real change. And there, perched atop that inner summit, lie compassion, generosity, and kindness, our most defining human attributes.

Let us resolve to plant new seeds of hope through the upcoming year, by setting off on a voyage of a lifetime! For that is the need of the hour!

Harianto H Mehta, Editor

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KINDFULNESS: THE NEED OF THE HOUR

BY SANGEETA IYER

If we look at how human behavior has changed since ancient times, it is fairly obvious that we have become more aggressive as a species; more egoistic, more volatile and easily prone to flare-ups of anger, impatience and unfortunately, violence as well. All around us we can see increasing evidence of self-centeredness and ascending intolerance wreaking havoc across the globe.

Why then, when we should be progressing with time, are we regressing into an animalistic state? The easiest excuse is to blame circumstance. "The times are bad," we say, absolving ourselves of responsibility for the manner in which we choose to act. How many times have we heard people say, "It's not me, it's the world! And when times are tough, we need to become tough ourselves to deal with them!?" Or "This is Kali Yuga," as if it explains, and even excuses, everything. However, as philosophers, we know that this is exactly the opportunity to look at things differently – and more so, we must choose to act differently in order to truly bring about the change we wish to see in the world. To "be the change" as Mahatma Gandhi said; we cannot just wait for it to happen as a miracle. So let us explore the meaning of Kali Yuga a little. How can it be a golden opportunity for us to make a difference,

instead of simply submitting to the Dark Age that it's painted out to be.

Our present time, said to be the *Kali Yuga*, strikes fear in the hearts of some people because it is associated with a time of turmoil. This *yuga* is believed to complete the cycle of the four great *yugas*: *Satya Yuga*, *Treta Yuga*, *Dwapar Yuga* and *Kali Yuga*. (1) These can perhaps be seen as equivalent to the Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age as defined by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. (2) Assuming this to be true, the Iron Age nomenclature foretells a time of corrosion, and the necessity of effort involved in keeping it rust-free. On a similar note, *Kali* means darkness, referring to "strife, discord, quarrel or contention." (1)

While the conjunction and movements of constellations and planets in the cosmos are important influences on the nature of our times, it is also imperative, however, to consider the value of the effort made by individual human beings that can make a difference to the intensity and the duration of this so-called age of darkness. Instead of thinking of it as a reality that we can do nothing about, we could make the effort to enhance the light within ourselves. Dante Alighieri wrote in

The Divine Comedy: "You men on earth attribute everything to the spheres...your Free Will...can still surmount all obstacles if nurtured well."

So how should we go about it and where can we begin? Perhaps we could draw inspiration from one of the wise voices in the world today – that of senior Tibetan Buddhist nun Tenzin Palmo, fondly called *Jetsunma*, meaning revered lady. In her book *Reflections on a Mountain Lake*, Tenzin Palmo says in her characteristic no-nonsense way, "In the East, some people blame their spiritual laziness on the fact that this is 'the dark age.' What is this dark age? This is where we are. The Divine is still with us and we still have our intelligence and our lifespan, so let us get on with it." (3)

However turbulent the times may be, the Buddha advocated treating violence with love, anger with compassion, and hatred with acceptance. Contrary to popular belief, if we adopt the approach of 'an eye for an eye', opposing violence with more violence, we would only end up in a downward spiral that makes the whole world blind. The idea is to embrace, not oppose...to include, not exclude. With dialogue that leads to understanding...with open arms and hearts.

To achieve this, Tenzin Palmo suggests that the starting point is Kindfulness – beginning with ourselves and then radiating that loving kindness onto others. A *kind mindfulness* as it were, towards everybody – because we are, at the end of the day, *One*; one life with multiple forms within it, completely interconnected with each other. So the intent is not to condone bad behavior in ourselves or others, but to accept limitations and work with them patiently and kindly. To understand that it is inner turbulence – our fears and insecurities – that reflects outwards in a web of cause and effect. It needs to be addressed at the root – in other words, its cause. A beautiful line from Madame Blavatsky's *Voice of the Silence* comes to mind: "Let each burning human tear drop on thy heart and there remain...nor ever brush it off until

the pain that caused it is removed." A surface cure would only provide relief from symptoms but would not address the real cause. And it is important to identify and heal the root cause before it cascades into a downward spiral.

Often, being truly compassionate means being honest in reflecting what is holding the other person back. It's like holding up a mirror to show how to take responsibility.

What causes such problems in the first place...where do their seeds lie? Jetsunma suggests that the answer lies in what the Buddha described as the greatest illusion of all: Separation. "The whole problem occurs because we have a very strong sense of 'I' and that naturally entails a sense of 'non-I' about everyone else... We want to do everything for the benefit of that 'I' that we perceive ourselves to be, at the cost of all the 'non-I's'. That's how selfishness is born." (4) The minute we define ourselves as 'Me' rather than 'We', we do everything in our power to seek pleasure and avoid pain – for our singular selves. And it is often at the cost of what would be good for someone else.

In her talk *Waking up from the Dream of Ignorance* she says, "The problem is not that we have thoughts and feelings – that's natural; the problem is that we *identify* with our thoughts and feelings...with this false sense of 'I'." This deluded view takes us to extremes of selfishness and greed and we end up ruining relationships and denuding the Earth in a frenzy of material consumption – which can never truly satisfy us because the gaping hole is actually in our spirit. "We have become like a cancer on the planet," she says sadly, observing this trend.

Therefore what is important is to be able to open up the heart; first of all, to learn to include others

and then to put others first. Marcus Aurelius writes, "What's good for the beehive is good for the bee." If only we thought like that more often.

So what do we mean by Kindfulness? And how far does it extend? Jetsunma says that even if there are people whom we consider to be not-so-nice, we can at least be kind to them. "If anyone says that they're enlightened but they're not compassionate, they're not really enlightened. It's like the two wings of a bird – you have to have both," she says. The Buddha has also said that we really need to guard our speech – every word we utter needs to be true, kind and helpful. It doesn't help for it just to be true, because not everyone can handle the truth if it is put bluntly.



However, genuine mindful kindness does not mean 'being nice at all costs'. Not at all. Often, being truly compassionate means being honest in reflecting what is holding the other person back. It's like holding up a mirror to show how to take responsibility for their *samsaric* problems – but doing so *compassionately*. Because we are truly invested in their growth. If we could all see how our anxieties, our fears, and our separation hold us back, perhaps it might give us a real chance to

change ourselves, with the aim of making the world a more just place.

The Dalai Lama says: "The most important thing is to develop a good heart." Especially in these trying times when people are misusing intelligence for selfish aims and destroying the planet in the bargain. This is exactly when we need to focus on how we are responding to these threats; although we have the instinctive and natural reflex of safeguarding our own interests, do we do so with a lack of regard for others? Are we able to respond as human beings who care for humanity, with the altruistic drive of helping others, if not put them first? The stellar example of Neerja Bhanot comes to mind. At the young age of 22 when she was a purser on a Pan Am flight, she gave her life shielding children against bullets fired by hijackers. She had also saved hundreds of other passengers in the harrowing hours during the hijacking. In recognition of her bravery, Neerja was posthumously awarded the Ashok Chakra, India's highest peacetime military decoration awarded for valour, courageous action or self-sacrifice. She is also the youngest and the only woman to receive this award. (5)

How is such magnanimity possible, we might wonder. Tenzin Palmo says, "When we reduce our obsession with ourselves, we allow something greater and more magnificent to manifest in our lives..The advantage of a human birth is that we can progress through our problems. Otherwise we'll get spiritually very flabby! You don't have to be a high level *yogi* or *geshe* to do this." So what holds us back? Ignorance of who we really are...fear of change...and the laziness to make the effort.

Many spiritual teachers teach us that our suffering is caused by ignorance of our true nature as a *soul*; our *real* identity. Plato said, "Man, you are God. But you forgot." So our real task is to remember what we have forgotten. And if the enemy is forgetfulness, the first arrow that we need to use against it is mindfulness.

The Buddha says: "Mindfulness is like salt in all the curries." It needs to be present in every action of ours. So perhaps the first step to becoming increasingly conscious is to become able to discern what is essential and what is not. Tenzin Palmo questions our motives when she asks, "We beautify our homes, our cities, our bodies – at great time and effort and expense, but where we really live is in our minds – how much do we spend on beautifying that?"

Many spiritual teachers teach us that our suffering is caused by ignorance of our true nature as a soul; our real identity.

Wanting to take the easy way out, we procrastinate using our careers and our families and our ailments as excuses, to say, "I can't practice any of this right now – I have so many things to do!" But being busy is "only a form of laziness," she says in her typically pithy way. "You take the same mind to the Himalayas...the same heart. So no excuses. No procrastination. Right now."

Being Kind to Ourselves

The first step is to observe our minds and check whether our thoughts are self-limiting or enabling our growth. Meditation is one of the methods by which we can train ourselves to be more mindful. However, we should be prepared to accept that it won't instantly be the panacea we are hoping for. In the beginning, it might even be the opposite! While many of us expect meditation to make us calm and peaceful, it often brings up the stuff we have buried away and want to keep hidden – "the great shadow" as Palmo calls it, which can be painful. Perhaps it might help if throughout the day, we can be vigilant and check our thoughts: Was I mindful or distracted? Was I having a generous thought, or a mean one? Because it's no use if we're calm and peaceful while meditating, but start yelling at someone the

minute we come out of it! We all get upset – not because things are imperfect, but because *we* are.

Perhaps another cure is to use "sandpaper for the ego". In Jetsunma's words, "If we always stroke ourselves with velvet, we'll feel nice but nothing will change. We need sandpaper which will make our rough edges smooth." But let's not just zero in on our wrongs, she advises: "Look at all the good things you've done. Pull out the weeds but also water the flowers in the garden of your heart."

All of this is preparation for *bodhicitta*; to wake up from the sleep of our ignorance. The main motivation is to make ourselves capable of liberating others, not just to seek nirvana for oneself.

Being Kind to the World Around Us

The Law of *Karma*, of cause and effect, is based on intention as much as it is based on action. Therefore we need to watch our intentions as well as our actions towards others. Everything we do has a ripple effect on the world around us and comes back to us as *karma*.

We should ask ourselves: is it really our intention to help others? One way to begin is to "dedicate the merit", as Tenzin Palmo says, whenever we do something good. "While doing prostrations, imagine all beings doing prostrations with you. We are their representative. Like at the UN – the whole country can't go to the UN, so we send a representative. So imagine all beings...and share the merit with them." She says, "Whatever we do that's virtuous, we should seal it with a dedication. We could say, this merit that I earn, may I dedicate it to all sentient beings for their enlightenment and happiness and well-being." As an anecdote, she shares an episode about a visitor who came to a nunnery and said to a 7 year old nun, "Isn't it nice that you're here? Now you can dedicate your good merit to your parents and family!" And the little girl promptly replied: "No, in this nunnery, we dedicate the merit to all sentient beings, not just our families."

This is similar to the Buddhist practice of *metta*-meditation: to radiate loving kindness towards everyone. Begin with yourself, then the people you like, then the people you're neutral to, and then the people you don't like, and then the whole universe. Send it love. "Love is the wish that beings should be happy. Compassion is the wish that they should be free of suffering. This is unconditional love – for everyone." A *geshe* in Dharamsala shares the value of being able to rejoice when someone else gets something that one wanted for oneself; to celebrate another's success as part of a fraternity. "Good things are happening to him – how lovely!" There's no envy. Just pure joy.

"The only thing we take with us is our consciousness and our karma – not a single paisa," Tenzin Palmo says emphatically. "When we die, we attract to ourselves those beings that are on a similar psychic plane as ourselves. So we will go to a good place if our consciousness is in a good place. Are we dwelling in contentment, peace and love? Or in anger, selfishness and self-pity? Impoverished? Or full with inner wealth? How many pop stars die of an overdose? Well, that doesn't sound like a wealthy mind!" It is evident that many people are deeply unhappy in spite of having all the physical trappings. All the wars in the world occur because people want more. So there's no point in accumulating material wealth if we remain empty on the inside. You don't have to *have* more, in order to *be* more.

Jetsunma echoes the Buddha when she says, "Try to keep a cave and forest mind, wherever you are." We could understand this as a state in which the mind is unattached to physical surroundings. It doesn't mean you don't enjoy things, it just means you don't get so attached to them that you feel incomplete without them. "Appreciate what comes but allow it to go. No sticky wanting! Be like Teflon – nothing sticks to it. Don't be like Velcro! The problem comes with the clinging mind – that's what causes suffering," she avers.

All our bad seeds will come up at some point or the other, but we don't know in which life. So it doesn't mean that people in adverse conditions are bad people, and those born in comfortable situations are good people. In this life, these particular seeds have come up as my opportunity to learn something that I have yet to learn. And therefore the important thing is how I respond to them. What seeds am I sowing now, with my conscious response? Surely I can curtail negative emotions like anger by making a conscious effort to transform it into patience and compassion.

There's no point in accumulating material wealth if we remain empty on the inside. You don't have to have more, in order to be more.

Finally, Tenzin Palmo suggests that we prioritize the fraternity and stay loyal to friends. This doesn't mean that we become naïve or gloss over their faults – instead a true friend might reflect to you your limitations in a compassionate way, to help you grow, to improve and be the best that you have the potential to be. Perhaps this is why the Buddha also emphasized harmony in the *sangha*, a fraternity bound by kindness, in which each individual represents a different note, but together we become an enriching harmony. Might this perhaps be the key to once again illuminate the light, so necessary in the *Kali Yuga*? ★★★

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EMPOWERING REAL CHANGE: PHILOSOPHY & ART

WORLD PHILOSOPHY DAY 2017
COMPILED BY HARIANTO H MEHTA



For New Acropolis members across the globe, every day in a way, is World Philosophy Day. Through history, classical traditions have employed philosophy as the central axis of education, recognizing the pivotal role of wisdom and ethics, in the formation of human civilization. Therefore, we mark the special opportunity of UNESCO's annual endorsement of World Philosophy Day to further emphasize the value of Philosophy, as a practical tool by which to improve our lives. Philosophy, which literally means 'love of wisdom', goes beyond the leaves of a book or the realm of intellectual debate. It can penetrate, and impact, every aspect of our life; it can be breathed, and practiced, and lived in every moment, every day. UNESCO recognizes the need of "raising public awareness of the importance of philosophy and its critical use in the choices arising for many societies from the effects of globalization or entry into modernity." (<http://www.un.org/en/events/philosophyday/>) If done correctly, Philosophy has the potential to catalyze the change that so many today see as imperative for the sustainability of human civilization.

To mark the occasion this year, on 16th November 2017, under the leadership of Yaron Barzilay

(National Director), New Acropolis Cultural Organization moderated an inspiring panel discussion entitled "Empowering Real Change: Philosophy & Art", to a full house at the prestigious National Gallery of Modern Art (Mumbai). While I know I will not do justice with everything that each of the panelists shared, compiled herein is my attempt to capture and summarize the principle themes encountered during the delightful evening.



Philosophy. Art. Change. The connection between these seemingly disconnected topics was woven together into a meaningful synergy by panellists comprising Shabnam Virmani (Singer & Filmmaker, Founder of The Kabir Project), Miti Desai (Classical Mohiniattam Dancer and Creative Head of Miti Design Lab) and Philosopher-Photographer Pierre Poulain (International Organization New Acropolis, Regional Coordinator). Each panellist's personal journey revealed the intrinsic relationship between Philosophy and Art as an instrument of transformation, the source of meaning, and an engine for self-discovery.

In order to begin this investigation, Yaron questioned whether it is even possible to live Philosophy without Art, or vice-versa? He observed that it is the aspiration for Beauty that drives Art and proposes that Wisdom and Beauty are indeed two sides of the same coin. But also, that true Art cannot lack meaning, an investigative philosophical search for harmony and aesthetics; the formal creative is but an expression of this mysterious search into the invisible world of archetypes.

Today, the need for change is so palpable that it sometimes expresses even as despair. Many seek real change, not just cosmetic fixes which only make us "feel good". Instead, we seek change that is sustainable and moving in the right direction. Hence, while it is evident that there is a definite relationship between Philosophy and Art, the question still remains: can it transform our lives? Through it, might we discover a path to reveal the best of our human potential? Yaron explains that a path leading to wisdom must necessarily bring about change. "Philosophy," he says, "is itself a dynamic art, an art of living, a constant search for harmony between seemingly contradictory aspects of our lives, through simplicity, greater depth, and unity – and this demands change." Philosophy and Art offer us role models, archetypes, an Ideal to follow in a world that condones "fake news" and

"post-truth", which is not driven by a search for truth, is therefore disconnected from objective reality, and is consequently moving towards increasing disharmony.



Music: Shabnam Virmani
(The Kabir Project, Founder)

Born and nurtured in an environment that staunchly fostered secularism and rationalism, Shabnam found her own paradigm based on rational knowledge and certitude challenged as she encountered the domains of faith, art, and philosophy through her journey.

She recalls her work as a social activist in the aftermath of the Godhra riots in Gujarat (India), trying to dispel stereotypes and change the misperceptions that communities had of each other, which were fuelling divides and instilling suspicion. Among her many projects, she produced and distributed pamphlets documenting research and statistics, and she says, "We really believed in that project of blowing these myths by providing data and research," with the goal to educate and alleviate ungrounded communal fears. But to her surprise, she found that the data simply did not percolate; there was always contrarian data

available and it therefore made no difference to peoples' opinions and prejudices. She realized that "change happens not through facts and statistics... if we are to rely entirely on intellectual discourse to shift peoples' way of being, and acting and thinking...then we are on a failed project."

Instead, she would discover that the true story of change, of transformation, one that would truly move human society, lies in the realm of an *akhlat katha*, as Kabir might call it, a tale that cannot be told because it transcends the intellect, penetrates and moves one from within, dissolving illusive boundaries. On a slow train journey through the Indian countryside, in harmony with the tinkling of cattle bells across the fields, she experienced this piercing shift suddenly and inexplicably, as a blind singer sung a few lines of a beautiful old Bollywood classic. Such is the domain of art and poetry and music, which she describes, again in the words of Kabir, as having the power of *shabd ki chot*, inflicting a lasting wound that triggers a shift, an inner change that cannot be described.



Shabnam Virmani with Moorlala Marwada, Malwa Kabir Yatra, 2010

This prompted her exploration of the grander cultural spiritual symbolisms and archetypes, through Kabir and through music. She says, "My journey moved me to a place of wonder and delighted mystery. From a place of anxiously seeking to define my identity in dualities, defined

by pro-this or anti-that, to a place of joy of not knowing...of collapsing those dualities, in perceiving oneself, and the world. To perceive the world not as *us* and *them*, but as a play of endless reversals. It moved me from a place of rights and choices and control, to a place of surrender, a faith in something that one might call a higher intelligence...It moved me away from looking outside for problems and trying to fix them, to looking within...to see how the fissures and the lack of peace within manifests in the world as war. And that this inner and outer are connected."



Pierre Poulain

Photography: Pierre Poulain
(International Organization New Acropolis, Regional Coordinator)

"The greatest art in my understanding is the art of living. This is the most difficult one, but it is the most wonderful one," says Philosopher-Photographer Pierre Poulain, revealing his stake on the true meaning of Philosophy. For Pierre, Philosophy entails a search for universal wisdom through the discovery of the meaning of life, to align to her natural harmony. Humbly, he explains that the ultimate Meaning lies in the realm of perfection, from which we are still very far. More achievable, however, is to set off to approach that state of perfection, and take

steps in that direction. And the direct complement of this approach is that "you must also offer it forward, you have to give it back. And here lies the true function of Art...to offer something far beyond your subjectivity..." The true artist looks for the best way in which to use his tools – the personality, the physical body, the emotions and intellect – not as a means of self-expression, but to emanate and transmit meaning, the universal light, wisdom. Therefore art can never be subjective or personal.

Pierre observes that the underlying force that drives Philosophy is Love, as a precondition. "When you love something or somebody, it's not enough to know that you love it. You need to experience it!" This echoes the age-old traditional saying that "To follow a path, you have to become that path." You have to experience it as your own reality. You have to be in love with it, with Life, with the Universe. And this force of love will enable us to get closer and closer to our *svadharma*, our purpose...and fuel the change from "Who am I?" to "Who can I be?"



Traditions across the globe speak of the human being as a complex entity comprising a tangible but transient and subjective self, the personality, which shall one day die, and is therefore often described as illusion, *maya*. But there is another aspect, the eternal higher self, the consciousness, capable of

objective discernment and intuition, our true being. Pierre describes that this change of identity, from the transient to the eternal, from the subjective to the objective, is to make life meaningful.

Interestingly, Pierre implements this aspiration through street photography. He says, "The more time passes, the fewer pictures I take...fewer pictures, but better pictures. This is because if a picture doesn't have a real meaning, it is not worth anything. But can I be the authority to recognize the meaning? No! This is because I will recognize it only through my intellect, my own subjectivity. Instead, as I walk through a street, I must take photos without the intellectual process of *recognizing*. And it really is like that. Something occurs...and 'tuk' – I take the picture. Only afterwards do I actually observe the photograph, and question what compelled me to click; was there a form, an energy, a light, a contrast, a paradox? – something that called me...[But for this] I have to be transparent. Usually when this occurs, the picture is a good picture, at least good enough..." Hence he says, "there is no such thing as *my* art, just like we cannot say *my* wisdom." Any artist is just a medium, through which wisdom or beauty can express.

So is photography then a simple result of luck? Recalling an interview of celebrated French photographer Henry Cartier-Bresson, Pierre shares that it is always a matter of luck. But what is important is that we have to *learn* how to be lucky. "You have in life a lot of opportunities. It is incredible! All the time! But we don't pay attention. Luck is to learn to pay attention and seize the opportunities you have in life...luck is when you become a disciple of life..."

Dance: Miti Desai
(Miti Design Lab, Creative Head)

A graphic designer by profession and a Mohiniattam dancer by passion, Miti Desai

contemplates: "I don't know if I'm any philosopher, I don't know if I'm any artist. But I do feel that I'm a seeker and it is with this intense feeling, this inner urge of seeking, that my journey really began."



After completing a 5 year undergraduate degree in Applied Art, she vividly recollects the "intense discomfort" that developed upon receiving her first assignment, on her first day, at her first job, when she realized the fundamental financial transaction that lay at the foundation of what she was assigned to create. She decided that it was not how she wanted to live her life, and was certain that she sought something beyond the mundane, "beyond what is told as what you're supposed to do."

Feeling deeply about the concept of design, she says, "I wanted to experience design holistically... I wanted to design with my body, I wanted to design with my soul, and with every part of my being, I wanted to understand *my* design." Her realization naturally led her to dance through which she found a way to bridge between external expression and internal experience.

She explains that to her, classical Indian dance, both in form, but also in the approach through which it was imparted, opened "a whole world view of design of being...which lends itself to

transcendence, which at every point reveals that the purpose of this life is to *grow*, to *transcend*, to dive into a higher dimension or an inner dimension." Because ultimately, all classical Indian art forms praise the gods and goddesses, which are symbols, cosmic principles. In doing so, each art form becomes a ladder by which the artist may grasp the archetypes and emulate them in life; to release oneself from psychological bondages in order to elevate consciousness to the state of *Shiva*, the divine.

Miti concluded that this is what she had been seeking: the means of creative expression as a pathway by which to live and experience. "*From the formless comes the form, and the form takes you back to the formless.*"



Each of these artistic journeys sheds light on the astounding relationship between Philosophy and Art. Each is an inspiration that demonstrates the role of Art, whether Music, Photography or Dance, as a genuine means of philosophical investigation that might empower real change. Each voyage reveals the underlying premise that motivates the true artist; the daring adventure to unlock the human potential. Perhaps through art we might once again inspire a renewal, a rebirth; a renaissance of Human Consciousness. ★★

DARING TO DREAM OF A NEW AND BETTER WORLD

Q&A WITH YARON BARZILAY, NATIONAL DIRECTOR
NEW ACROPOLIS CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

BY MANJULA NANAVATI

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Tall, trim and relaxed in any environment, Yaron Barzilay smiles easily, but weighs his words very carefully. Understated and well-read, he punctuates his conversations unexpectedly, with an incisive colloquial humor that betrays his acute sense of the current socio-economic and political climate, and his capacious grasp of India's history and mythology.

Professionally, Yaron Barzilay is the Managing Director of IDEX India – a leading diamond trading platform for professional diamond traders worldwide.

Yet what really lights up his life, is his passion for philosophy, and the unassailable belief that it has the ability to bring about profound and sustainable change.

To this end, in 2006, he founded New Acropolis Cultural Organization in Mumbai, a non-profit organization represented in over fifty countries, established on the foundations of Practical Philosophy and Universal Fraternity. Its goal is threefold; to encourage the love of wisdom through the comparative study of philosophies, religions, sciences, and arts; the development of

human potential through ethical principles; and the integration of each individual as an active and conscious part of society.

Few people know that Yaron is a certified specialist of Eastern and Western Philosophy, including History, Symbolism, Moral Philosophy, and Psychology. He has authored several investigative articles and spoken at a variety of forums, exploring timeless and universal philosophical concepts as relevant to modern daily life.

Editor-in-Chief of The Acropolitan Magazine, launched to inspire young adults in Mumbai, he has also spearheaded a number of initiatives to foster social and ecological responsibility, demonstrating that promoting humanitarianism is the most constructive means to tackle societal challenges. Under his leadership, New Acropolis has successfully partnered on initiatives with Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) to execute volunteer driven civil beautification and cleaning drives, and presented awareness campaigns and exhibitions at Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, Jehangir Art Gallery, National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA), and National Gallery for Modern Art (NGMA).

G2 met with this dynamic, progressive changemaker, to find out what inspires him, how he stretches time to accomplish so much, in such diverse fields, and how he bridges East and West, professionally, personally, and most of all, philosophically.

As Yaron warmed to his favorite subject, one could not help being drawn to the quiet strength of his moral convictions, applaud the magnitude of his commitment to serve, and be inspired by the intensity of his empathy for mankind.

THE ACROPOLITAN: The name New Acropolis is intriguing. What does the name and the institution stand for?

YARON BARZILAY: Acropolis literally means 'higher city', and the idea represents the place where we look to for inspiration, our higher thoughts, the source of Beauty, Truth and Justice. In Ancient Greece cities were built around the concept of an Acropolis, a citadel which housed a temple, a sacred theatre, a place of justice, and around this was the Agora where the citizens lived their daily lives. We find something very similar in other ancient traditions too. The symbolic meaning of the legendary Hastinapura, which literally translates to the City of Elephants (a symbol of wisdom), was a reminder to its citizens of what should be their primary aspiration.

Acropolis then refers to both a physical place that embodies the higher aspects of our lives, as well as an inner higher place within each and every one of us.

And to me, this is exactly what we are missing today. We are so consumed with survival in the day-to-day engagements that we forget the central aspect of why we are here at all.

New Acropolis is a School of Philosophy in the classical manner. That is to say our purpose is not to learn *about* philosophers and their philosophies,

but to learn *from* them. What is crucial is the idea of implementation, rather than the theory per se. We must learn from our past, not just from the traditions of India or Greece or Rome, but the combined heritage of humanity, and then implement that consolidation of ancient wisdom in the present, in order to create a bridge to our future.

It was schools such as these that were able to re-invigorate culture and civilization through past ages.



TA: But in a world replete with technology, where information and knowledge is literally at our fingertips, what is the relevance of a classroom to young adults on the fast-track of their careers?

YARON: The first point I would like to make is that we must recognize that technological advancement, while allowing us to live and learn better, is a tool that serves a certain purpose. But regrettably there is the danger of it transforming from an instrument meant to serve us, into a master. It is extremely important to learn to discern between tools and their purpose.

Therefore, what I really would like to touch upon is the purpose of education, rather than the methods we might employ. Is education synonymous with the gathering of information? Or should education also allow us to discover ourselves? The etymology

of the word comes from the Latin *educare* which means 'to bring out', implying that there is already something essential within us that needs to be drawn out and brought to light. This needs to be the guideline for a beneficial education; not just absorbing more knowledge and acquiring more skills. Instead, we must ask, for what purpose is this knowledge and these skills?

Here again we come to the role of philosophy, which pushes us to ask those very basic questions that will define how we live: Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is the purpose of life? To think that these are questions that we can leave to tackle at some hypothetical 'later' is completely illogical. To initiate these questions, ones that we all have, is philosophy. To search, to learn, to engage with enquiry, to question, to find answers that will lead you to new questions...isn't that what education is, to evolve?



And it's not exclusive to a classroom. The application manifests as an ability to volunteer, to be humane, to care for the world. This cannot happen because someone lectures you. You need to discover it within yourself, which will only happen through an intense, internal investigation. Starting in a classroom leads to a better understanding, which in turn allows you to take it forward in any way you want.

Philosophy contains the idea of wisdom. The classes we offer at New Acropolis are meant to initiate this

process. Its purpose is to take the philosophy out of the classroom, and into your life.

TA: One of the essential principles of New Acropolis is the comparative study, where you bridge the seemingly disconnected branches of Arts and Sciences. What is the value that we can draw from this?

YARON: Unfortunately, this is a characteristic of our times, the emphasis on specialization. But to be a specialist one needs to focus on one thing and segregate it from everything else. To aid this, our education system separates everything into different silos – physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, history, geography, art. Yet life is not dependent on any one skill or expertise. Life is everything.

And by seeing life from only one perspective, we are missing out, not just the whole picture, but the wholeness of life itself. So, the method of comparative study seeks to investigate the holistic approach to life, by emphasizing the connectedness of knowledge. If we only focus on life through the perspective of science and ignore art and philosophy, we will understand in depth the *how* of life, but very little of the underlying *why*.

Without searching for deeper meaning, beyond the limitation of forms, we may be losing what Saint-Exupery called 'the essential that is invisible to the eye'. And how do we engage with this subtle essential? By perceiving the common ground that speaks to us through myths, unifying thousands of years of ancient traditions, through symbols, which speak of common realities, similar shared experiences and universal truths.

This does not mean that everything is the same, but that everything evolved from a common origin.

TA: You have lived, studied and taught in both Israel and India, interacting with people from both western and eastern cultures. Is there a difference

in their approach or sensibility to philosophical thought?

YARON: By its very nature, Israel is a mix of people and cultures from all over the world. My mother comes from Poland, and is a holocaust survivor, and my father's family is originally from Yemen, though he was born in Israel. To me, that separation between East and West has never been so clear-cut. Moreover, if you see our planet as a globe, then East and West mean nothing, because wherever you stand, relatively speaking there is East on one side, and West on the other *[laughter...]*.

It is true that there are differences: we look a little different, we talk a little differently, we have different traditions. But if we turn our attention to the common ground instead, then it is also true that we are all human; we live in one world, and what we do in one part affects the whole. That to me is far more essential, and a far more pertinent outlook, rather than the differences. I'm not saying they do not exist, but that they are not of foremost importance.

TA: Today however, we are living in an increasingly divisive world where differences are unfortunately and sometimes quite violently highlighted. What can be done to mitigate this problem?

YARON: Yes. I agree with you in this observation that we live in a world that seems to be moving more and more towards separation, and conflict. It is ironic that we talk of a global world where communication is at its peak, and yet it seems harder and harder to co-exist.

One answer or solution to this is the concept of fraternity. But it cannot remain just an ideology or a Facebook campaign that collects likes. It is not enough to understand something, to agree with something. We need to live it. We need to discover it as a profound truth of life itself. Real fraternity can only come if I bring down the illusionary walls of separation that lie within me. If I don't do that, I will

only talk about fraternity, but I will not be able to resonate with someone else's joy or fear or needs. We must develop empathy, an understanding of the other, and go beyond the limitations that make us obsess over ourselves. Without empathy, how can we make the world a better place?



Image Courtesy: by Natalie Pedigo / unsplash / CC BY PD

A good exercise that I like to offer is to visit a Mumbai train station at rush hour, where you can literally see thousands of people. Or observe a tall residential tower, where you can see hundreds of living rooms, and imagine that inside each one, there are people and families similar to your own. We don't need to be ingenious in order to understand that their day-to-day concerns are not so very different from our own.

Yes, our lives are pressured, but as Seneca reminds us, "we are not ill-supplied of time but wasteful of it." We have exactly the right amount of time available to us if we utilize it correctly. We have to create the opportunity to go beyond our self-interest. I don't mean we need to ignore who we are, but in fact we need to become who we really are. We are a force of life, we are a part of life. These masks we wear today, of gender, age, and nationality are true...yes...but this is only part of the whole truth. Fundamentally we are all human beings. Perhaps we should actually say we are all living beings... sharing our planet with so many others. When we are able to rise above the

temporary definitions that we label ourselves with, we naturally develop empathy; naturally we act with the generosity of a volunteer, naturally we live as philosophers.

That's our impact. That is what I would say a school of philosophy in the classical manner hopes for.

TA: In a world where hunger, poverty, pollution are such pressing concerns, can philosophy really provide an answer.

YARON: The answer lies in your question. Why is the world full of hunger, poverty and pollution? We seem to have the requisite knowledge and technology, yet we are no closer to solving these issues. That is exactly why we need philosophers.

TA: To change our way of thinking?

YARON: To change the way we are. People understand what is the right thing to do in order to solve many of the world's problems. But they don't follow through with that. This dichotomy between what we know to be true, and how we continue to act, is exactly the problem we need to solve.

Philosophy is not, as most people think, an endless intellectual debate, detached from solving practical problems. On the contrary, it is an intelligible perspective of life that expresses itself in everything we think, and feel, and do. It is the ability to honor thought with action. It is the ability to live and put into practice what I believe to be right, not only for me, but for others, and yes, for the rest of the world. It is the ability to view myself not as a separate unit, engaged only with my own survival or my short-term benefit, but as part of a whole symbiotic relationship with all of life. Philosophy without altruism is incomplete, and altruism without philosophy is not possible.

To me philosophy is really an adventure; to live by the truth as I understand it, is always a challenge.

To act for the benefit of others by overcoming one's own propensity towards selfish interest is a challenge that philosophy can help one overcome.



TA: But when one is so bogged down by the individual struggles of everyday life, in what way can philosophy be of practical help?

YARON: It is true that when a person is hungry he is consumed by just the need to survive. But for many of us, it is up to each individual to choose how much time to allocate to all the different priorities and obligations that life throws up. It is time to really dedicate ourselves to things we value. It is time to understand that philosophy must become a way of life.

It cannot be that one aspect of you sits through a philosophy class and then another completely divorced aspect of you deals with the day-to-day predicaments of your life. In fact, it is exactly in *how* we deal with the difficulties that is the application of our personal philosophy of life. So why do we need time for that? We can practice philosophy at home, when we are at work, when we sit with a friend, and

yes, when we face obstacles in our life. Life is where philosophy expresses itself. A class for two or three hours a week can orient us, but how we deal with life is eventually based on the way we recognize ourselves, and the meaning we give to life.

Victor Frankl said in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* that we need to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead think of ourselves as those who are being questioned by life - daily and hourly.

That is what I mean by *living* philosophy.

TA: Establishing a suitable platform, creating a fitting bridge to a better future requires voluntary service and a change of mindset. What is the answer to a cynical generation wanting to know *what's-in-it-for-me*? Or on the other hand, many who are idealistic and full of hope, but discouraged by the enormity of the effort required for sustainable change?

YARON: Volunteering and service is the natural expression of a true philosopher. It cannot be forced. Natural empathy cannot be imposed. But I think it is important that we should not blame the new generation. It is not their fault; it is the fault of the world they have been born into, what this world is preparing them for, and consequently what they understand as a way of life.

But I would take inspiration from the life of Gandhiji and Confucius. Though it may sound a little naïve, I do believe that sometimes what we call naivety may be profound truth. Change can only begin with us, from us, and by us. We need to be the change we want to see. This philosophical realization underlines the essential role of philosophy. It is a path of self-discovery, of the realization of the unity, of identification with the whole, of developing empathy towards all.

It is essential to share this magnificent aspiration: we can change world, if we can change ourselves.

TA: As the world slowly embarks on learning how to revitalize itself in a necessary renaissance of sorts, what can India offer or contribute?

YARON: India has its undeniable uniqueness, its colors, its traditions, its art, its philosophy.

Ever since I was a child, I was drawn towards India. I could not travel until I had finished High School, but I had this aspiration for an inner search fueled by the idea of what India symbolized. India is a complex diversity of languages, traditions, religions and philosophies that are thousands of years old, maybe even more ancient than historians have conventionally acknowledged. Through time it has always been a land of seekers, wise men, disciples, and philosophers – lovers of wisdom, who found truth and inspiration and expressed it in literature, poetry, song, dance, sculpture, art, and architecture. Millennia have been spent sharpening ancient wisdom, burnishing the richness of ideals, and investigating systems of thought that lead to self-knowledge, transmutation and truth. That impact of wisdom still exists today. You have only to open your eyes to Indian art and philosophy, gaze at her ancient monuments and sacred temples to experience it.

By the time I had been here just a few months, I came away with the idea that I would find the true purpose of my life through philosophy. That was the gift that India gave to me. And that is a precious gift that India can share with the world: that life implies constant change and growth, that your own evolution proceeds from the pursuit of the essential reality that is beyond what we see, that man has a purpose, a purpose that lies within him, and to discover and conquer that path is his principal endeavor.

I'm not saying that India is an exclusive place to engage with ancient wisdom. But what I am saying is that this land we call India is soaked with it, and at New Acropolis, as Indians, we can take a step forward and share it with the world. ★★★

SCALING AN INNER SUMMIT

BY VISHAL PAHLAJANI

"Adopt the pace of nature: her secret is patience."
- Ralph Waldo Emerson

All through the ages nature has time and again instilled a sense of awe and wonder within human beings; at her unparalleled beauty, at her mysterious methodology and her enigmatic laws that govern the universe.

The ancient Greek philosophers, specifically the Pre-Socratic philosophers are said to have lived their lives with a deep sense of this mystery. Their deeply rooted understanding of the laws of the universe contributed to their aligning their lives with the path of nature. Plato, as well as the Stoics who followed later, believed all of nature to be an expression of the One - the Divine. This infinite and eternal Divine Unity, the Divine spirit manifests itself in the plurality of the material realm, animating it so as to embark on a journey of growth and development, an expansion of consciousness, which eventually leads back to the source to complete a cycle. According to the Greeks, as human beings, we have the unique potential to consciously explore this path of merging back into the infinite source: the path of Beauty, Justice, Goodness and Truth. This multitude of expressions, when researched, understood and practiced, yield to a process of discovery that brings us closer to our origin.

"I am seeking the unknown in myself...Through the wilderness I can go deeper and deeper into the layers of my unknown inner being."
- Reinhold Messner

In a world, impermanent by nature, in which we give temporary qualities dominant importance, there is a danger of becoming entrenched in the acquisition of material objects and artificial manmade "duties" which typically serve selfish needs related to the personality's base desires. Concurrently, there develops a sense of imprisonment that begs to be vanquished; an imprisonment of the inner being which has within it the implicit need to be unleashed, although it might have yet remained unheard, almost unnoticed. This silent call of the inner being strengthens. It is a call to fulfill and realize its own true potential - to do justice to its external manifestation. In the human context, this reveals the true purpose of our personalities as tools that must be used to live our *swadharma*, to recognize the larger role and purpose of our life.

In my experience, one way to burn away the illusion of the strong external material current - thereby allowing the inner voice to be noticed - is to venture into nature, retreat into the mountains, with the definite purpose of climbing to the peak.

In contrast to the typically fleeting events and occurrences we experience within the city, mountains exhibit a quality of permanence and stability in an immense sustained form. It sometimes feels as if they even emanate a magnetic force of attraction which draws you towards them gradually. Man's higher self, his profound and eternal identity, resonates and identifies with the manifestation of these divine and harmonious qualities of the mountains. Perhaps, many peaks in the Himalayas serve as sights of pilgrimage precisely because their scaling peaks appeal so strongly to our inner being.

There are mythologies which talk about mountains that are said to hold within them keys to the mysteries of nature, waiting to be unlocked. This beautiful symbolism is seen across various cultures throughout human history. Some cultures have emulated the essential structure of a mountain in their sacred monuments for example, the pyramids in Egypt and in Peru, and the architectural form of Indian temples. The construction of these pyramids and temples perhaps symbolized for pharaohs and priests the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm, Unity and plurality, the Divine and man. It is evident that these structures served as a bridge to connect the Divine aspect within man to the Divine source. Similarly, scaling a mountain might reveal our own Divine nature, our true selves.

"I am climbing in the higher altitudes for knowing myself...not just to explore the mountains."
- Reinhold Messner

It all begins with the intention, the Will. Once the intention to climb a peak has been established, work towards that goal begins. Preparing and working with a plan, with discipline, perseverance and consistency. The preparation includes becoming capable physically, but also taking care of logistics and acquiring equipment well in advance. There cannot be any doubts about gear malfunction; God forbid your gloves aren't warm enough on a cold night while climbing in the snow. Packing equipment

and tools for the journey serves as an exercise in discernment, to leave behind the non-essential and only carry what might really be required.

Beyond the materials, there needs to be resilience at the emotional and mental level as well. This preparation is done alone, with our own will and our individual effort. A guide or mentor might encourage you, and provide tips and suggestions, but the work remains your own.

The actual journey finally begins with an approach trek to base camp. The challenges here are fairly negligible, and are certainly worth overcoming in view of the beautiful landscape. Deep valleys, rushing rivers and stunning blue skies excite the personality and arouse sentiments that awaken the soul.

As you ascend higher, the air becomes thinner, containing less oxygen. Consequently, one requires more energy to do any kind of work. Without "acclimatizing" in a proper manner to this higher altitude, even laughing can cause one to feel breathless. Therefore, the lesser the material belongings you carry, the more efficient you would be while climbing.

Then there is the unpredictability of the weather which too could create opportunities for one to demonstrate dauntlessness from within. Being so high up in the mountains brings you closer to the clouds, when a thunderstorm happens, it is not above you, but all around you – the thunderclaps that echo all around you, are an unparalleled dramatic experience. The immense splendor and magnificence of the mountains can sometimes beguile the personality, causing us to forget how menacing and merciless the mountains can be. A violent avalanche could easily wipe out the most carefully pitched tents even if the campsite has been ideally placed. These are just some of the various hazards that one needs to be aware of and so one has to be constantly in a state of attention, watchfulness, and awareness of the environment, and ourselves.

Doubts and fears of all kind need to be set aside, no matter how deeply rooted, and replaced with strength, courage and conviction. A sense of bold and deliberate confidence in your preparation and abilities - which you have been working on - are just as essential as any gear or material objects required to facilitate the climb. As progress is gradually made, it develops into a process of inner purification and cleansing, as you shed away layer upon layer of defects and vices such as arrogance, weakness or cowardice. Limitations of the physical, energetic, emotional and mental planes need to be overcome thereby allowing the Will of the higher self to supersede the voices of the lower, through virtues of temperance, patience, persistence, focus, attention and precision.

And finally the climax - known as "summit day." The team is ready to make the attempt for the last leg of the climb, the peak. It is initiated at night when the snow is more stable. The typical summit day climb of 10 to 15 hours roundtrip culminates with the arrival to the peak at around sunrise which also allows for the most incredible and awe-inspiring panoramic views.

Climbing on summit night is an activity that compels you to dive inwards, with each step forward, until the final goal has been attained. I experienced it as a soul searching effort that concentrates the attention of the senses, awakening a profound sense of belonging, a widened consciousness.

And yet, all this soul searching may still not yield the eventual goal of reaching the top of the mountain due to the many risky obstacles which could potentially create a fatal situation. Soft and fresh snow for example, could easily trigger an avalanche which is a very real threat to any climb. A less radical event but unpleasant nonetheless, could be a situation of strong winds and low temperatures causing frost bite. These risks are an immense lesson in humility and respect towards the forces being encountered. It makes you appreciate and admire the vitality and

exuberance of nature, while respecting her power and ability to slowly, but surely, bring you face to face with some of her laws, both physically as well as internally. It is an exercise in an expansion of consciousness, to slowly encompass all elements at various levels and dispel the darkness of doubt, the fear of the unknown.

However, when this journey is successful and the goal is attained, the sense of elation, joy and glory is a glimpse into another realm. It fills the being with an uplifting sentiment which is empowering yet humbling. Upon returning from this sort of journey one can spend days and even weeks reflecting on the entire experience. The accomplishment intoxicates, and is initially exhilarating, electrifying and inspirational. Allowing the nature of inner being to manifest pushes the boundaries of the personality and helps overcome the limitations set by our fears and comforts. As we go back into our more familiar environment, the comfort zone of the city, we again lose this sense of empowerment. The material forces once again dominate, and all that remains is a faint memory of what it was like to BE - free of the confines of the personality.

This "spiritual hangover" might inspire us to let go of the many layers that blanket our inner being; layers of worries, fears, anxieties, doubts, inhibitions, and the imperfections surrounding us, which are not really attributes of our true eternal and divine identity. We must dare to go beyond the illusion of separation, to be able to allow the inner being to blossom, no matter what the task at hand, and no matter where we are conducting ourselves. Doing so might enable us to encounter the beauty of life, and the Divine which expresses itself throughout the material realm. It will allow our higher being to express itself through our efforts and our work, leading us to a place of sustainable happiness, joy and gratitude.

"It's not the mountain we conquer but ourselves."
- Edmund Hillary ★★

THE BARRENNESS OF A BUSY LIFE

BY TARINI VAIDYA

Last week I tried to catch up with a few friends for dinner, three to be precise. Can you believe we could not find a date when we were all free to meet until almost a month later! My friends work and I'm the only one who doesn't work. Guess who was the busiest? Yes, you guessed right - me!

So I began to ponder what it was that kept me so busy, and the whole concept of busyness in general. We fill our days with tasks, writing them down in digital reminders. We tick them off triumphantly as we complete them, only to periodically add to the list again! So we seem to be on a never ending wheel of chores and busyness.

In fact, "I'm so busy" seems to have become a mantra. We feel relevant when we have something to do. We feel important when we are busy. Our personality rejoices in this importance. In our world today, a busy work and social life has become a measure of one's success.

Several years ago when I voluntarily quit my job, colleagues and friends were aghast. "What will you do?" they asked, over and over. "Smell the roses!" I would respond delightedly, only to be met with eye

rolls. We work our whole lives to be able to save enough money to do the things we really dream of doing - exotic travel, a penthouse apartment, fancy cars, philanthropy.... the list is almost endless. We say, "When I have enough money, I will do this and this..." But how many of us can define 'enough'? Many years ago a friend said it was Rs 1 crore. Now he says it's Rs 5 crore. And I'm sure his goal will change upwards once more!

At the core, beneath all the sheaths we wear, our True Self is concealed, like a diamond in the rough, waiting to be mined.

So I set out to explore the idea of nothingness. *Shunyata*. Have you ever de-cluttered your wardrobe? Given away clothes worn once, clothes you don't fit into anymore and never will, something you bought on a whim but which you now regret buying. I'm sure you have and I'm sure you have also experienced that huge sense of relief when you did. It was almost cathartic and therapeutic. However, soon our closets are filled again...and the

physical and mental space we had created is once again overflowing.

It is the same with all the tasks we fill into our lives, through which we look for external validation of our existence. We need other people to tell us that we are kind, or that we are beautiful. But the mystics have said, since time immemorial, that all that we seek is already within us. Look deep into yourself, truthfully, and you will know when you have really been kind or when you have just been going through the motions. We all wear masks, sometimes to fit in, sometimes to be who we think our partner, parent, or friend wants us to be. There's nothing really wrong with that, as long as you know you are wearing a mask and that you are able to detach your real self from those personas you don from time to time. Just don't become that persona. Why do you need someone else to love you? You can only become what you really are if you love yourself. Then you will realize what you are supposed to be – a reflection of Divinity. And you will know that you are complete, you are good, you are beautiful, without someone else having to validate it for you. This is something you will know for sure. Deep within. You will not have to be in constant motion, with a laundry list of 'to dos' to feel fulfilled. You will find the validation you seek within yourself, in your silences, in your stillness. Your validation comes from knowing who you are – not the home you live in, not the clothes you wear, not the job you do, not the roles you play as a parent, spouse, child, or friend. And in this 'nothingness' you find your True Self, and that nothing changes to everything.

So troubled was I within my 'busyness' that I decided to explore further and embarked on a journey into nothingness, zero, shunyata, cessation.

In esoteric philosophy the number zero has great significance. According to esoterism, each number from 1 to 9 represents a force, an energy, a principle building block of life. The number zero, however, stands apart. It is abstract, without dimension. If

the numbers 1 through 9 represent creation, the manifest world, rupa, then zero represents the un-manifest world, arupa, the invisible, eternal, and primordial dimension. It is the mystical source of creation. It represents Unity with the Divine. It is symbolic of the limitless boundary-less ocean from whence all creation emerges. Therefore zero, which in our modern world stands for nothing, was indeed everything for the ancients. So essential and sacred was its idea, that it was not used in mundane daily life, such as commerce. The number zero was represented by a single point, dimensionless. It represented the center. It signifies everything and nothing at the same time. The alpha and the omega. The source and the destination.

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Esoterically, therefore, zero is like our own true, divine nature. At the core, beneath all the sheaths we wear, our True Self is concealed, like a diamond in the rough, waiting to be mined. At our core we are simple and pure, devoid of accouterments and embellishments. We are nothing, yet we are everything. Zero, a single dimensionless point.

There is a story of a man who goes to a guru. "Teach me," he says to the guru. The guru sends him away.

Twice more the man returns to the guru with the same request and is met with the same response. The fourth time the guru gives him a cup full of water and asks him to add more water to it. "I can't," says the man, "It will overflow." The guru responds, "That is the case with you. How can I fill any teaching in you when you are already full?"

And so must we empty ourselves in order to connect with our true selves. We have to die to all that we are, or think we are, in order to be reborn to who we truly are; divine beings.

In Chapter 6 of the Bhagwad Gita, Krishna teaches Arjuna the art of meditation. He tells Arjuna to abandon all desires, even the desire for perfection, in meditation. The senses are controlled by the mind. They should not be suppressed, but controlled slowly, gradually, until desire falls away of its own accord. Then when the mind has attained some quietitude, the intellect should be used to subdue the mind, and the seeker should spend time in quiet contemplation upon the Self. Finally, one must let go of even this contemplation.

The mind must cease all activity in order to realize Divine Bliss. There is total cessation. A void, shunyata, perhaps?

Meditation does not mean that we run off to a cave high in the Himalayas and sit in the lotus position with eyes closed! That can, at best, be a one off experience, forgotten when the regular noise of daily life intrudes. It is true that a daily practice of meditation brings focus to consciousness. However it is not just a ritual, limited to a certain length of time. Meditation is a state of mind, 24/7, even in your sleep. It is an awareness, a stillness of mind, a centeredness, even in the midst of rush hour traffic. As Eknath Easwaran puts it, "It is not during meditation that you make progress in meditation; it is during the rest of the day. What you do in meditation is get the power, install the dynamo; the actual work is done after you open your eyes, get up and go out into the world." You have to carry that nothingness with you. Let it permeate your being. Understand what is real and permanent and what is just transient. Let meditation be a state, not an act.



Image Courtesy: Shutterstock / Unsplash / CC BY/ PD

Exploring further I came across the concept of shunyata in Mahayana Buddhism. It is described as the 'great void'. In today's parlance, the word 'void' implies something that contains absolutely nothing. However, the Buddhist tradition uses the term to describe a state free of rising and falling, utter calmness and cessation. This is often misinterpreted as a state of non-existence. On the contrary, according to Mahayana Buddhism, shunyata is a positive state, that does not obstruct other things. All form, all that is visible, is by nature obstructive. The great void does not serve as an obstruction to the manifest world, the rupa. In fact it serves as a means for matter to function. The void provides the space for the material world to go through its cycles of manifestation and disintegration, rising and falling. If the nature of the manifest world was not impermanent, then no new phenomena could arise due to the co-existence of various causes. In the material world, eventually everything ceases to exist. Cessation is the original source, and the final destination of all existence.

We have to die to all that we are, or think we are, in order to be reborn to who we truly are; divine beings.

Hindu creation myths speak of the concepts of manvantara and pralaya, cycles of creation and cessation, inhalation and exhalation. We believe we 'are' when we inhale. Yet our first and last moments in physical form are exhalations – a baby's first cry and the last breath. It is almost counter-intuitive for us to desire to cease. We attach so much importance to ourselves – our bodies, our minds and our intellect. We feel that our absence will create a void. Yet our True Self, the one concealed within all the layers, longs to return 'home', to complete cessation of its individual identity and a final merging with the Source.



Therein perhaps lies the source of the voice of the soul, the voice of silence. Amidst the cacophony of a busy life, we do not hear its call. We have to train our ears to listen to it. And once we hear its call, it will be like a crescendo! Nothingness is everything, busyness is nothing! As if to hammer home the point, the Universe conspired to force me into house arrest for a week in the middle of August. I thought I'd go stir crazy. After all I had a long list of tasks that were impatiently awaiting completion. However I just stayed at home. I did not watch TV or read fiction. I sat in one place and gazed out of the window. I saw a tree swaying in the monsoon wind; I saw crows huddled against the pouring rain. I found spiritual context in it all. My mind was at ease, focused on nothing. I breathed in the emptiness and I exhaled it. Slowing down was blissful. There is a tongue in cheek Spanish saying, "How beautiful it is to do nothing and then rest afterwards!" Italians have a lovely phrase "Dolce far niente," which loosely translates to "the sweetness of doing nothing." Try it. You will find doing nothing is actually very fulfilling. It is, in fact, doing everything! In being nothing, you will blossom into being something special; your True Self. ★★★

THAT WHICH YOU SEEK

BY DIPTI SANZGIRI

At some points in our lives, many of us face some nagging questions. What manifests is a sense of restlessness, a lack of real happiness and peace - despite the absence of any apparent reason for feeling so. Questions like, Am I doing what I *should* be doing? Do my actions have any meaning or purpose at all? What *is* my purpose?

How would you respond if at such moments, you got a direction like: "That which you seek is seeking you." (1) Or if you hear with a transcendent clarity: "My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that, and I intend to end up there." (1) Would you not be inspired to pursue an investigation: What could be seeking me? Where has my soul come from? What direction takes me back to where I came from?

Such simple but deeply profound responses to reflective questions of life can come only from an elevated consciousness, free of the constraints of mundane motivations, an uncluttered mind. Such was the case of Jalal ud Din Muhammad Balkhi - the one from Balkh, or Roman Anatolia - or Rumi as was made popular by the western world. A Sufi poet for most, a Master for Mevalana tradition disciples, an Islamic scholar for readers of *Masnavi* - his 6 volume treatise which is regarded as the Persian language Quran by all Sufis - an exemplary disciple

for all disciples, absorbed by love and devotion to his master.

For all those in whom the search for the real, the Truth, is awakening, an encounter with Rumi is like encountering an ocean. Not only in terms of the sheer volume of his written work which by any standard is huge, but more importantly, the depth at which he touches the mysteries of life is deeply penetrating. Once you put your feet in those waters, you are bound to drown in the depth of his love for you. In his writing, we can feel his deep suffering at seeing us live in ignorance, blinded by illusions. Everything he offers to us is with that immense compassion, driven by causing us to see and experience that which he already has, so that we might move from darkness to light!

There is a fountain inside you. Don't walk around with an empty bucket.

You have a direct channel into the ocean, yet you ask for water from a little pool.

Beg for the love expansion. Meditate only on THAT...

Knock on the inner door, no other.

Sloshing knee-deep in fresh river water, yet you keep asking for other people's water bags.

Water is everywhere around you, but you see only barriers that keep you from water. (3)



Rumi tries to show us our abundant true self and our pitiable condition of not being aware of it all! As humanity we have been relentlessly seeking happiness from things outside ourselves either by acquiring material wealth or fame or from love and approval from others. Rumi reminds us that what we are seeking is actually already inside us! And that we have a direct channel to the ocean itself! How futile then, that we still keep searching for water outside! But which fountain and which ocean is he talking about?

Human life has a special and unique gift – access to the mental spark, light, given to us by that one divine intelligence. This intelligence, if invoked, allows us to see the connectedness of everything in life, the unity that manifests through the diversity of forms! It is said that the Buddha had explained that by understanding an orange completely and deeply, one can understand the entire Universe. Hence, in order to see and experience Beauty, Love, Kindness and Justice, which is the first place I should investigate? Myself. The moment we look within, we begin to glimpse the fountain that exists inside us! And Rumi also tells us how to do that.

"Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it." (1)

As we begin our journey on this path, we will encounter the many layers of likes, dislikes, hurt, pain, beliefs, anger, ego, and ambition...veils that cover our true being, obstacles that prevent us from being who we truly are. But we will also find through this inner search, that we have the capacity to peel off these layers slowly but surely.

This journey is not easy. It requires hard work of invoking the Will, paying active attention to the motor behind our every action, and the painful letting go of old habits and automatic reactions that block our evolution and serve only the preservation of an old illusory identity. Initially, the fountain inside me is invisible but since the bucket I hold is real for me, I become dependent on it.

"If you are irritated by every rub, how will your mirror be polished?" (1)

And if you want this mirror to be polished, you have to be prepared for a thousand rubs by sand paper! For graphite to become a diamond, it has to go through the intense pressure and heat, deep in the Earth's crust, for many millions of years, without which it cannot transform!

What would be this pressure and heat for us? Every time we face the gap between what we understand and believe to be the right thing to do, and what we actually do. Initially, we may not even be aware of this gap! But the moment we choose to pay attention, we come face to face with this ethical issue. And then conflict within arise and then the Will to choose the right has to be evoked to fight the comforting tendency of choosing the wrong. For example, let's say we agree that focus and concentration is the key to pierce through the haziness of mind to consider any subject with clarity. However, the mind has the natural tendency to scatter, always on the move like a butterfly – from one thought to another. Hence I conclude that I need to tame my mind, and gain the ability to direct it. However, I rarely take out

time, or put in the effort, to develop this ability and my mind continues exactly as it was! The conscious choice to move out of my comfort zone becomes necessary in order to encounter what for me is unknown, uncomfortable, but right. And this movement, this effort, and the need to overcome the fear and inertia, is exactly the rubbing of the mirror that Rumi speaks of. Without this rubbing, I will not make any progress; I will not encounter my potential.

And who better than Rumi to show us that when we finally understand this path that leads from darkness to light, even wealth and fame cease to hold one back. Rumi's life story is just as inspiring as his writings. He was born to a scholar father who had introduced young Rumi to several sources of knowledge and many respected Maulavis and Sufis of the time. On the early demise of his father, he had become the head of the Madarasa in Konya. And at the age of 34, he already had hundreds of disciples. So by all accounts his was more than an accomplished life; famous, respected and even revered by many. However, in just one encounter with Shams, a wandering dervish, all of this ceased to matter!

In order to see and experience Beauty, Love, Kindness and Justice, which is the first place I should investigate? Myself. The moment we look within, we begin to glimpse the fountain that exists inside us!

Shams and Rumi shared an intense relationship as friends, but also as Master and disciple. Rumi's first encounter with Shams is described in various versions. However, the essence of all the versions is that Shams pierced through the scholarly knowledge of Rumi and dazzled him with an

experiential knowledge of the divine. Rumi's son, Shamsad Walad, wrote later: "After meeting Shams, my father danced all day and sang all night. He had been a scholar - he became a poet. He had been an ascetic - he became drunk with love." (2) This encounter caused Rumi to leave behind his illustrious scholarly life, and plunge deep into the mysteries, driven by the love for his master, the one who revealed to him his soul, his true identity.

When we consciously seek, we might encounter or get a glimpse of truth. But then we are faced with the choice of leaving behind what we had known till then, or instead, to follow the newly found truth. But how many of us are able to contemplate this choice! We are so deeply attached to our personal identities, defined by illusory and transient characteristics. We define ourselves as accomplished artist, a lawyer, a doctor, a caring husband, wife, son, serious or fun loving, adventurous or cautious, etc. And we limit ourselves with such identifications so strongly that we are unable to see beyond. We come face to face with the challenge of harmonising these different aspects of our lives, by developing a centre, our true identity, beyond all the temporary masks and roles that we might play.

It is said that at the end of that first encounter with Shams, Rumi fell into a semi-conscious state, emerging again as a different man. In Urdu, such a mystical experience is called *fanaa*, the annihilation of the ego. All his worldly identities – his knowledge, his disciples, his family, his fame – just fell to dust. And his consciousness was absorbed in the grace and love of divinity that had come to him in the form of Shams. And such love is difficult to describe and explain. It can only be experienced and seize the opportunity to do so when life brings you a teacher.

The rule that covers everything is:

How you are with others, expect that back.

If you want to know God, enjoy the company of lovers.

*If you want to be thought a great person,
Learn some subtle point and say it with many
variations as the answer to every question.
If you want to live your soul, find a friend like Shams
and stay near. (3)*

**It is a constant battle – of
defeating my weaknesses
by invoking my strengths, of
recognising my true identity
when I am taken by my ego -
all the time, every time.**

This force of love transforms also others around us. Because when you truly love someone you are no longer the same person. Something changes in your inner being. Suddenly, you put someone else's wellbeing before your own! We, who are usually obsessed with, I, me and mine, when truly experience love for someone else, forget about ourselves – a sort of fanaa. And here we speak about love not as an emotional excitement, which is transient, but as a force of life, a force of attraction, a force of unity.

*An ant hurries along a threshing floor with its wheat
grain,
Moving between huge stacks of wheat, not knowing
the abundance all around.
It thinks it's one grain is all there is to love. (3)*

We make that one grain, that small world of ours, the object of our love. We are completely blind to the vastness of life, all of creation that is expressing its love for me. We take everything in life for granted. The sun, the rivers, the trees, the treasures of mother earth, everything. And then the wonder for that phenomena just doesn't exist! But if we were to recognise the giving nature of life, selflessly, without expecting anything in return, then we would be awestruck by it.

And if we continue on this path, we might discover that it is us who live in an illusion of separateness. If, and when, we are able to transcend this illusion, open ourselves to boundless possibilities, life responds many times more!

*Did you hear that winter's over?
The basil and the carnations cannot control their
laughter.
The nightingale, back from his wandering, has been
made singing master over all the birds.
The trees reach out their congratulations.
The soul goes dancing through the king's doorway. (3)*

The winter of separation from my inner, higher self has ended and a deep inner joy of the Spring has bloomed! The soul, the nightingale, has taken its true place as the master over all the other lower aspects of myself; my body, my emotions, my ego, my likes and dislikes, and guides me on my path. All the rubbing has given the result and the glimpse of my true self can finally be seen in the mirror!

And yes, it is a constant battle – of defeating my weaknesses by invoking my strengths, of recognising my true identity when I am taken by my ego - all the time, every time.

And Rumi again very lovingly and with lot of compassion exhorts us,

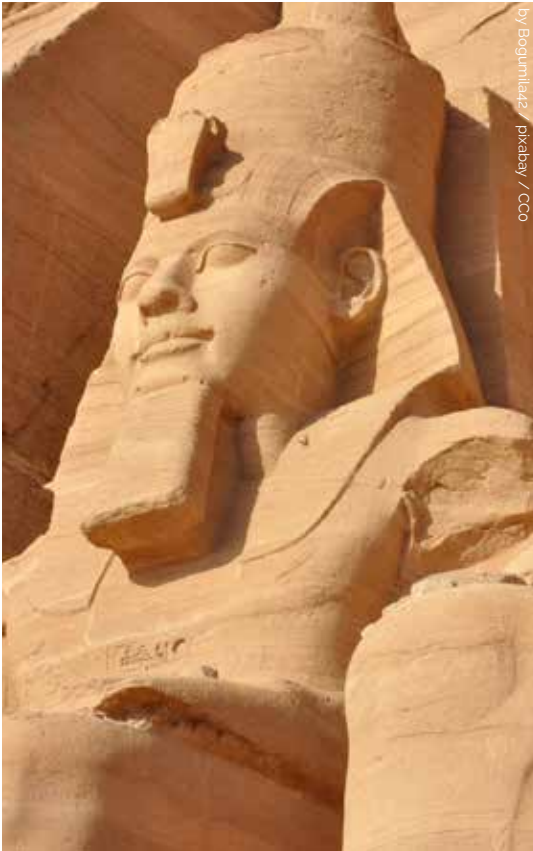
*Come, Come, whoever you are,
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving,
This isn't a caravan of despair,
It doesn't matter, if you have broken
Your vows a thousand times before,
Still and yet again,
Come again come. (3) ★★★*

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 2. Star, Jonathan. Rumi: In the Arms of The Beloved. Penguin USA (2008).
 3. Barks, Coleman. Rumi: The Book of Love. HarperOne (2005).
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INVISIBLE EGYPT

Interactive Talk @ Colaba (Main Centre)

Saturday, 20th January 2018

6:00PM (2hrs), FREE ADMISSION

Today the word 'invisible' is often taken to mean 'non-existent'. But for the ancient Egyptians, the invisible was the cause of the visible and therefore, in a sense, more important. They realised that the form of a person, what they wear and how they appear is only a reflection of something internal which we cannot see. And likewise that the things that are most important to us, such as life and death, justice, thoughts and feelings, are all invisible. So they dedicated their civilization to a profound investigation – and a living experience of the invisible side of life.



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BARRENNESS OF A BUSY LIFE

Interactive Talk @ Khar

Saturday, 20th January 2018

6:00PM (2hrs), FREE ADMISSION

"Beware The Barrenness Of A Busy Life" – Socrates

In the competitiveness of today, efficiency and busy-ness are often linked together. We even take pride in being busy, and if we are not busy, constantly doing something, it seems like we are missing out! But does this busy life lead to happiness and fulfilment? Or is it that when we look back, we see that we missed out something important, even if we can't always describe it. Join us to explore how we avoid the trap that philosopher Socrates warned us of more than 2400 years ago!

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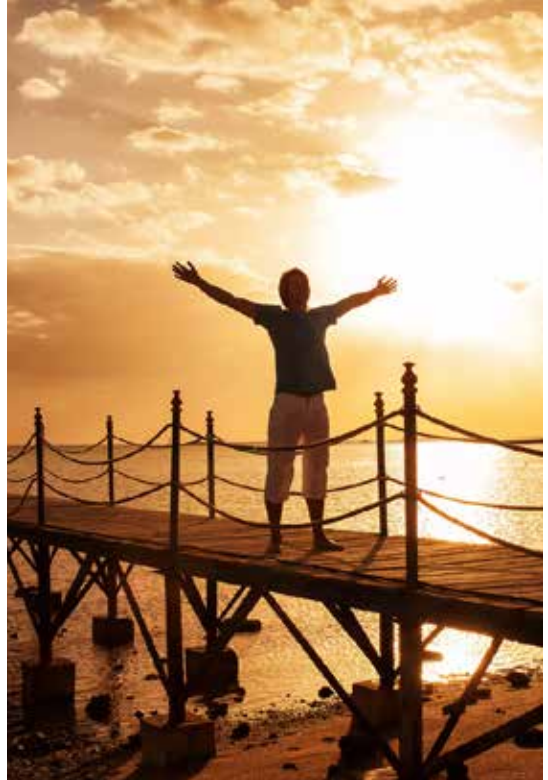
THE FREEDOM TO BE

Guided Discussion @ **Colaba (Main Centre)**

Saturday, 3rd February 2018

6:00PM (2hrs), FREE ADMISSION

What makes some people realize and fulfill their potential while others are left with a sense of missing out? Many of us feel that we are not able to fulfill our true and full potential. Science provides us with conclusive evidence that the human potential is far greater than what we know today, but only few manage to get close to it. An open discussion on the possibilities of self-actualization and living with a sense of fulfillment.



LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Course Introduction @ **Khar**

Saturday, 3rd February 2018

6:00PM (2hrs), FREE ADMISSION

Success and Happiness have been the pursuit of the human being through the ages, and yet it feels as though both Liberty and Happiness elude us today. What does it truly mean to Live? What is the source of Liberty and Happiness? Maybe its not a formula, but an Art!

This talk is a sneak peek into our flagship Practical Philosophy course "Living Philosophy – Discover. Awaken. Transform." Starting on 19th Feb at Khar and 27th Feb at Colaba which speak about eternal principles practical to our lives today!

COLABA (MAIN CENTER)

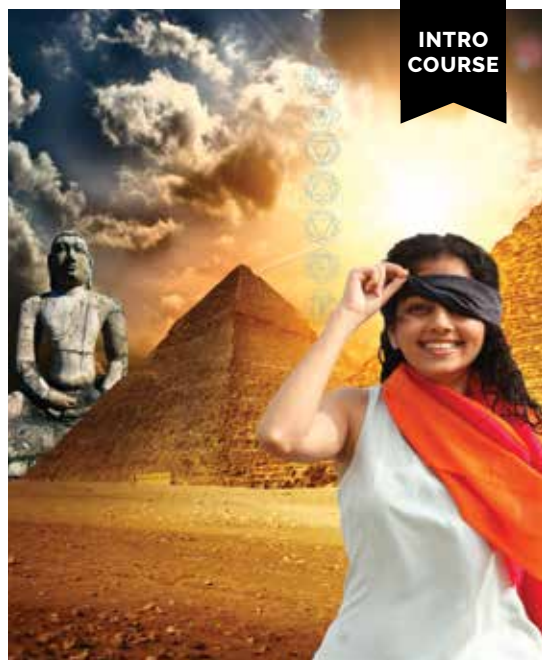
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LIVING PHILOSOPHY: DISCOVER, AWAKEN, TRANSFORM

PRE-REGISTRATION REQUIRED

Course @ **Khar**

INTRO: **Monday, 12th February 2018**

Course Starts: **Monday, 19th February 2018**

Course @ **Colaba (Main Centre)**

INTRO: **Tuesday, 20th February 2018**

Course Starts: **Monday, 27th February 2018**

7:30PM (2hrs)

This is a 16-week introductory course on practical philosophy that establishes the basic foundation of every aspiring Philosopher. The course weaves a journey through a comparative study of principles of Eastern and Western Civilization, to develop sensitivity towards the eternal principles of life. Together we will explore the Mystery that is hidden in life and what it means to be a philosopher. The course is to inspire you to ask the great questions of life, and to give you tools to face personal and collective challenges.



DON'T JUST SURVIVE, LIVE!

Course Introduction @ **Colaba (Main Centre)**

Saturday, 24th February 2018

6:00PM (2hrs), FREE ADMISSION

Philosophical traditions through the ages have all emphasized the "meaningful life". They suggest that the human life is a great adventure if we develop ourselves to live with this attitude.

This talk is a sneak peek into our flagship Practical Philosophy course "Living Philosophy – Discover. Awaken. Transform." Starting on 27th Feb at Colaba and 19th Feb at Khar which speak about eternal principles practical to our lives today!

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MAN'S ROLE IN THE UNIVERSE

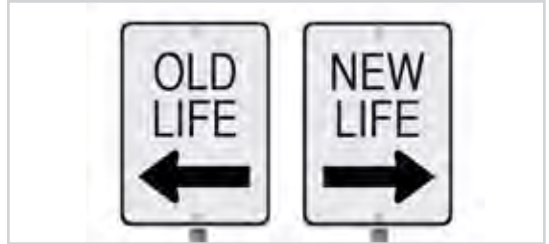
Interactive Talk @ Khar

Saturday, 24th February 2018

6:00PM (2hrs), FREE ADMISSION

"You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop." - Rumi

To think of the human being in the context of all of the universe is mind boggling! Do we have a role to play in the grand scheme? If so, what is it and how do we come to understand it, while dealing with the enormity of the Universe? Together we will refer to the legacy of many ancient philosophers, and to see if the answer to this question requires a shift in our perspective towards life and the universe!



DARING TO CHOOSE

Interactive Talk @ Colaba (Main Centre)

Saturday, 10th March 2018

6:00PM (2hrs), FREE ADMISSION

Our choices determine how happy or satisfied we are in our life. Yet it is difficult to make choices since what is right and what is comfortable to do, don't always match. So then how do we make truly meaningful choices? In decisive moments in life, more than all, we need to dare to choose! Join us as we explore how Daring to Choose can be a secret to true freedom!



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THE ART OF CONCENTRATION

Talk and Workshop @ Khar

Saturday, 10th March 2018

6:00PM (2hrs), FREE ADMISSION

Are we ruled by 30-second commercials and stories told in 140 characters? Do half-baked ideas leave us jumping from one half-done project to another? Are we too busy to seek the meaning in the work that we do?

It is too easy to get lost in doing too much. Join us for a practical workshop to discover how we can learn to guide our own concentration and bring more focus and depth in our lives.

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MAHABHARATA - THE WAR WITHIN

Interactive Talk @ Colaba (Main Centre)

Saturday, 17th March 2018

6:00PM (2hrs), FREE ADMISSION

The epic battle of Mahabharata and the timeless teachings of The Bhagawad Gita are our human heritage. Maybe the hero Arjuna fighting a valiant battle with the guidance of Krishna, is more than a story, but indeed speaks to each one of us! Let's explore how these timeless teachings can guide us today as we engage with the Kurukshetra of our own daily lives!



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WHO AM I, WHY AM I HERE?

Interactive Talk @ Khar

Saturday, 17th March 2018

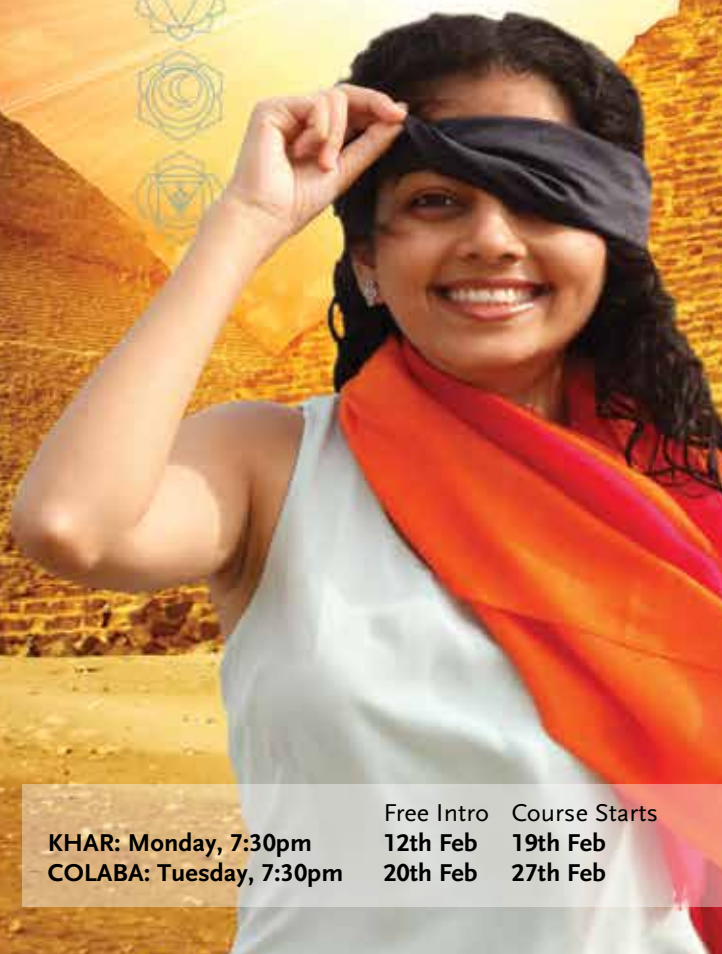
6:00PM (2hrs), FREE ADMISSION

In our journey through life we often ask fundamental questions about our purpose, and life's ultimate meaning. If only there was someone to guide us on how to seek the answers to these questions! We will see how these questions sparked the investigation of wise men through the ages who sought answers, leaving for us clues as principles that we can bring into our lives to know ourselves better!

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