

Ancient Wisdom Leads to Happiness in the Time of Covid-19

By Ashwini Mokashi

Of all people only those are at leisure who make time for philosophy, only those are really alive.

Seneca (c. 5 BC--AD 65)
On the Shortness of Life

The pandemic got me wondering: Could I put my scholarly studies of ancient philosophy to practical use helping myself and others get through this difficult time? I wanted to take Seneca's words seriously. These months of imposed stay-at-home leisure have given me a chance to reflect on life, to be creative and resourceful about ways we could change our lives.

Our forced reliance on the internet gave me ways to engage in conversations about ancient Stoic and Hindu precepts about wisdom, virtue, and happiness with individuals and audiences in places I had never imagined I could reach (see links below). In the American Philosophical Practitioners' Association, I found both a new set of congenial colleagues and a new career direction -- a philosophical counseling practice, certified by the APPA, aimed at serving people suffering during the Covid-19 crisis. Closer to home, my course, "Wisdom Leads to Happiness," allowed me to explore these issues with wise elders in the Princeton Senior Resource Center's Evergreen Forum.

The talk organized by Garje Marathi, a global non-profit in California that works to unify people from the Indian state of Maharashtra who have settled outside India, gave me a chance to connect with people who speak my mother-tongue and who, like me, have spent much of their lives outside the motherland.

The connection of Indian philosophy and the topic of Bhakti or devotion, an important theme in my work on the comparative studies in Stoicism and the Bhagavad-Gita, became a focal point in my talk with the students of the Hindu Life Program in Princeton. I wish I had met them all in person, but it was still nice to be in touch with the local Hindu community.

The virtuous life is the happy life, the ancient sages insisted. And virtue cannot be passive. So, I was spurred to take a more active part in fighting the pandemic. Volunteering with the Montgomery Emergency Medical Service to organize monthly blood drives, to help local hospitals replenish dwindling blood supplies has brought me new friends, a new sense of connection to everyone in my community – and, yes, greater happiness.

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