Best of Hitopadesha

Part - I
Knowledge—the Highest Form of Wealth

by Satyanarayana Dasa

The Backdrop
About 1,500 years ago the King of Iran got hold of a book that contained the secret of how to raise the dead by means of rasayana, an elixir of life. The book explained the procedure to extract the elixir from herbs and trees growing on the high mountains of India. Eager to sample this elixir, the King sent his chief minister on a quest for the prescribed herbs and trees.

In India, the minister was well-received and aided by the sages. He scoured the mountains for the herbs and trees to make the elixir. No mixture he made, however, could bring the dead back to life. Finally, the disappointed minister concluded that the information was false.

Greatly distressed about returning empty-handed and disappointing his king, the minister asked his hosts what to do. They led him to a famous philosopher, who once searched in vain for the same elixir, and in the end discovered that the elixir was actually a book.

The philosopher explained that the story about the elixir was allegorical. The high mountains in the story represented the wise and learned men of lofty intellect; the trees and herbs, which are the products of the mountains, indicated the various writings of those sages; the elixir itself denoted the wisdom extracted from the sages' writings, which revived the dead intelligence and buried thoughts of ignorant materialistic men.

Relieved and elated, the minister begged a copy of the book from the philosopher, translated it, and returned to his king. That book we know today is a variant of the book of Hitopadesha.

The origins of this book are a little less known. Study of old handwritten manuscripts, however, reveals that Narayana Pandit, who lived in the fourteenth century Bengal province of India, wrote the book on the request of King Dhavalchandra. Traditionally, it was taught to the initiated students in gurukula (ancient Hindu residential school in India).

Hitopadesha, or “Good Instructions”, is famous for its wisdom and is one of the most popular books on ethics and polity. It uses the
story-within-a-story format, with animals as the main characters. It is popular with children because of the fables, in which characters of animals are used to personify certain traits found in humans. I am happy to have been able to translate this book from its original Sanskrit couplets. This will surely expand the reach of Hitopadesha and help children and grown-ups alike by being a tool while taking decisions. It will also inspire them to overcome their daily problems.

Below is an extract taken from the first chapter of Hitopadesha. I have selected the fourth couplet from this chapter. This is the first write-up of a series of total three articles that will be published in future.

“The best wealth is knowledge—it cannot be stolen, it is priceless and imperishable.”

The original couplet puts forward the three reasons why vidya (knowledge) is the best wealth.

Aharyatvat—Knowledge cannot be stolen
A rich man is always anxious that his wealth may be plundered or embezzled, lost in speculative business or gambling, or that he or his relatives may be held for ransom. Today’s rich man can easily become tomorrow’s pauper. As depicted in the epic Mahabharata, Yudhisthira lost his entire kingdom in a day and Dhritarashtra lost all his sons in eighteen days along with the kingdom they had acquired by intrigue against their cousins, the Pandavas. Here, material wealth and happiness is compared with the instability of a drop of water on a lotus leaf. The short story that follows illustrates the precarious nature of riches.

Once, two brothers left their village to seek their fortune. One brother entered a gurukula and studied. The other became an apprentice to a rich merchant. After some years they decided to visit their parents and offer whatever they had earned. On the way, dacoits attacked and seized all the wealth of the brother who was the merchant’s apprentice. The other brother, who was only carrying wealth in the form of knowledge from books in his mind, was left untouched.

Knowledge cannot be snatched or taken away. It is permanent, never burdensome to carry, and causes no anxiety. Instead, it alleviates one’s anxiety. Therefore, knowledge is the most stable form of wealth. Furthermore, spiritual knowledge is never lost, even after the demise of the body. It is a permanent asset.

Anarghatvat—Education is priceless
Although worldly affluence is limited, vidya is unlimited, for no one can estimate the extent or value of one’s knowledge. With knowledge, one can earn any amount of wealth. Consultants in different fields earn millions, while their knowledge remains intact; in fact it increases with time and experience. Knowledge is also priceless in the sense that it cannot be purchased like other commodities; it has to be earned by individual effort.
Aksayatvat—Education is imperishable
Worldly riches diminish when distributed. As a result, most people are not enthusiastic about indulging in charity. Vidya, however, increases when shared with others.

This is especially true with spiritual knowledge. A man enriched with transcendental knowledge can distribute his wealth unlimitedly, yet his wealth of realisation will only increase. This can be practically tested when one tries to explain the philosophy of Vedic literature, which presents the path of pure devotional service to Lord Krishna as the true culmination of all knowledge. The more one talks about the Vedic teachings, the more one’s store of transcendental knowledge increases. This experience is available to anyone who does not adulterate the true spirit and intent of the Lord’s instruction to Arjuna.

Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita, “In this endeavour there is no loss or diminution.” When one dies, his worldly wealth is left behind, but spiritual knowledge is never lost. It is carried with his subtle body to his next life. In this way, spiritual knowledge is superior to worldly opulence.

In this connection, there is a story about a proud king who was attached to worldly opulence. A saintly person once called on him, and noticing the king’s strong attachment to mercenary objects, suddenly became very serious. “Why have you become so grave?” asked the King.

“I can foresee,” replied the saint, “that very soon you will die; but don’t worry. Your pious deeds will elevate you to the heavenly sphere. However, there is one problem! Your heavenly palace will be infested with mosquitoes, and though you will have a nice mosquito net, it will have a hole through which the mosquitoes will enter and bite you.”

Though the king liked the saint’s message, the bit about the mosquitoes disturbed him. For, he hated them. However, he assured the saint that he would simply have the net mended.

The saint replied, “That’s alright, except for the fact that in heaven there are no needles. So when you die, be sure to take a needle with you.”

“But how can I take a needle with me?”

“I have no idea,” said the saint, “but if you cannot even take a needle with you, then why are you so proud of your earthly opulence?”

Hearing this, the king realised the futility of his attachment and forsook his false pride.

Therefore, knowledge is the highest form of wealth.

Endnote
To sum up, here, I quote Shri Shukracharya, who says, “Vidya is superior to material wealth as it is the cause of earning all other wealth; it always increases when given in charity; it is never burdensome to carry; and no one can ever forcibly take it away.”
Below is an extract taken from the first chapter of Hitopadesha. I have selected the twenty-sixth couplet from this chapter. This is the second write-up of a series of total three articles that will be published in future.

“If one does not attain any of the goals of religion, economic development, regulated sense-gratification, and liberation, one’s life is useless, like the milk-less nipples hanging from a goat’s neck.”

The Four Goals of Life
According to ancient Indian scriptures such as the Vedas, the purpose of human life is to strive for the following four goals—pursuing one’s religion, attaining economic development, accomplishing regulated sense-gratification, and attaining liberation. Accordingly, the Supreme Lord offers human beings four types of pathways in the form of shastras (scriptures) to guide us towards the fulfilment of these goals.

The first among these is Dharma Shastra (theology and liturgy) that explains and lays down a person’s religious duties according to his or her age and nature of work. Second comes Artha Shastra (economics) that elucidates on the use of ethics by people while acquiring wealth by fair means. It also advises rulers on better public administration and offers instructions on proper conduct. The third guiding light is Kama Shastra (treatise on sex) that describes the process of gratifying one’s sexual desires without transgressing religious principles. Moksha Shastra is the fourth Dharma Shastra that describes how to attain liberation from the cycle of death and re-birth.

According to the Vedas, man’s average lifespan can be divided into four equal Ashramas (segments)—Brahmacharya (celibacy), Grihastha (family life), Vanaprastha (hermitage and mendicancy), and Sannyasa (renunciation). The first segment (Brahmacharya) constitutes the student life during which one learns the importance of all the four goals in life. During the course of Brahmacharya, students are expected to live a celibate life inside a gurukula under the tutelage of a guru (master). Throughout the rest of the Ashramas, one should practise religion, earn money and indulge in activities that gratify one’s senses in such a way that the three neither become come in the way of nor become independent of each another.

The Goal that Demands Self-Restraint
Here, I would like to throw light on the Kama Shashtra which is often mistaken for a means to encourage promiscuity. A case in point is Kama Sutra, a treatise on sex authored by Vatsyayana. Vatsyayana does not prescribe unrestricted sensual pleasure, nor is he
opposed to it. A person who indulges excessively in the enjoyment of the senses cannot expect a happy and a long life. He therefore prescribes self-restraint and celibacy during the student life so as to channel one’s energy solely into acquiring knowledge. He also explains the importance of dharma, artha, and kama and concludes that artha is superior to kama, and that dharma is superior to artha.

Amazingly enough, Vatsyayana himself was a lifelong Brahmachari (celibate) and he wrote the book to encourage self-control, not sexual pleasure. He declares this in the concluding verses: “This Kama Sutra has been compiled by me, while observing celibacy and trance to teach proper human conduct, not attachment to sex. One who knows the essence of Kama Sutra and who protects dharma, artha, and kama by his dealings in society, will certainly become jitendriya—a master of his senses.”

The Ultimate Goal
Observing the above discussion, Narayana Pandit says in Hitopadesha that an intelligent human being must pursue one or more of these four goals according to his or her respective shastra. Otherwise, his or her life will be compared to the useless udder-like appendages hanging from a goat’s neck from where kids cannot expect milk. The pursuit of artha and kama while ignoring the scriptures will not lead one to the ultimate goal of life because although the living entities are naturally attracted to sensual gratification, the real goal is to become free from it.

Hence, the ultimate purpose of the sanctioned sense-pleasure is Nivritti (renunciation). When artha and kama are pursued according to the shastras, they can be counted as the Supreme Goals as they ultimately lead to the detachment of the body from its by-products. This is in addition to the fact that ultimately there is only one Supreme Goal—the attainment of moksha. The other three goals enable one to realise the fourth by dovetailing one’s natural human propensities.

The Fifth Goal

Here, I think it is worthwhile to mention Shri Chaitanya, a devotee of Lord Shri Krishna. He, however, is of the opinion that beyond these four goals there is a fifth one too, which is the highest goal of human life—prema (love of God). Prema brings peace in this life and the next, while the other goals simply lead to temporal happiness because in the next life we must start all over again.

Today, everyone is searching for the perfect person to love and be loved by, but, by forgetting the Almighty, the source of love, we have created so many false objects of affection. Without a loving relationship with someone as perfect and worthy as God Himself, we cannot be one with Him and be happy. This propensity to love is gained by chanting the Lord’s names without offence under the guidance of a bonafide guru.
Best of Hitopadesha—Part - III
Good Company and Bad Company

Below is an extract taken from the first chapter of Hitopadesha. I have selected the forty-first couplet from this chapter. This is the third write-up of a series of total three articles that have been published in series.

“One’s intelligence is degraded by associating with uneducated people, remains the same by associating with equals, and is improved by associating with superiors.”

An Elucidation

Before I delve into the essence of the above statement let me throw some light on education. In the above statement ‘uneducated people’ do not necessarily mean people with low formal education. The meaning of the term ‘education’ has been used in its broader perspective. By ‘educated’ we mean people who are characterised by rich experience, unsurpassed learning and sublime culture. They are those people who live for fulfilling the five goals of life as discussed in my previous article (“The Four Goals of Life”, The Jiva Newsletter, Vol. 1, Issue 5, Sep. 2008). So, ‘uneducated people’ are those who do not exhibit any or all of the above qualities.

Mirror as a Metaphor for Man

A person’s mind reflects influence of people around it just like a mirror does nearby objects. A mirror, however, does not acquire the qualities of the objects it reflects; whereas the mind is influenced by the characteristics of persons with whom we associate. It is said, therefore, that a man is known by the company he keeps.

There is no denying the fact that man is indeed influenced by his company—be he a saint, a sinner, an ascetic or a thief. A man is like a cloth which absorbs the dye it is soaked in.

In the epic Ramayana, Dvivida was a devotee of Lord Rama who fought against demon king Ravana’s army, yet later himself developed demoniac qualities due to the association of another demon Narakasura. As a result, in the other epic Mahabharata, Dvivida was killed by Lord Balarama for his abominable behaviour. In contrast, Narada was the son of a maidservant who became a great sage by holy association.

The mirror as a metaphor for the mind indicates that the effect of association is instantaneous, but people generally find it difficult to believe the almost instantaneous effect of association on the mind of another. Contemporary students of human nature are aware, however, that there is no exaggeration at all. For example, after studying human nature for more than fifty years, humanistic philosopher Erich Fromm made this observation about bad company:

“Bad company, on the other hand, is not only the company of merely trivial people but of evil, sadistic, destructive life-
hostile people. But why, one might ask, is there danger in the company of bad people, unless they try to harm one in one form or another?

In order to answer this question it is necessary to recognise a law in human relations: There is no contact between human beings that does not affect both of them. No meeting between two people, no conversation between them, except perhaps the most casual one, leaves either one of them unchanged—even though the change may be too minimal to be recognisable except by its cumulative effect when such meetings are frequent."

The Exception
The book Hitopadesha itself is a collection good instructions given by the learned man Narayana Pandit to the dull sons of King Dhavalchandra to turn them worthy of ruling the empire when they grew up. The king exhibited wisdom, therefore, in arranging Narayana Pandit for his dullards to have good association. One may argue that the boys’ association would negatively affect the learned brahmana (person with highest intelligence). While it is generally true that association influences both parties, there is no mutual exchange of influence in the case of one who is not weak-willed, but mentally strong and fixed in his own values. Otherwise ascetic saints would never grant their association to materialistic people. It is to be understood, therefore, that the learned brahmana would uplift the ignorant princes, while their company will have no ill effect on him.