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Comparison of the Conceptualization of Wisdom in Ancient Indian Literature with Modern Views:

Focus on the Bhagavad Gita

Dilip V. Jeste, M.D.^{1,2} and Ipsit V. Vahia, M.D.¹

¹Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging, and Department of Psychiatry, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA

²Veterans Affairs San Diego Healthcare System, San Diego, CA

Abstract

The study of wisdom has recently become a subject of growing scientific interest, although the concept of wisdom is ancient. This article focuses on conceptualization of wisdom in the Bhagavad Gita, arguably the most influential of all ancient Hindu philosophical/religious texts. Our review, using mixed qualitative/quantitative methodology with the help of Textalyser and NVivo software, found the following components to be associated with the concept of wisdom in the Gita: Knowledge of life, Emotional Regulation, Control over Desires, Decisiveness, Love of God, Duty and Work, Self-Contentedness, Compassion/Sacrifice, Insight/Humility, and Yoga (Integration of personality). A comparison of the conceptualization of wisdom in the Gita with that in modern scientific literature shows several similarities, such as rich knowledge about life, emotional regulation, insight, and a focus on common good (compassion). Apparent differences include an emphasis in the Gita on control over desires and renunciation of materialistic pleasures. Importantly, the Gita suggests that at least certain components of wisdom can be taught and learned. We believe that the concepts of wisdom in the Gita are relevant to modern psychiatry in helping develop psychotherapeutic interventions that could be more individualistic and more holistic than those commonly practiced today, and aimed at improving personal well-being rather than just psychiatric symptoms.

INTRODUCTION

The study of wisdom has become a subject of increasing scientific interest and inquiry over the past three decades, although the concept of wisdom is probably an ancient one (Ardelt, 2004; Baltes and Staudinger, 2000; Brugman, 2006; Robinson, 2005a). It has been suggested that modern conceptualization of wisdom and its domains is derived largely from concepts described in classical Greek philosophy (Brugman, 2006). Recent work, primarily in the fields of gerontology, psychology, and sociology, has focused largely on defining wisdom and identifying its domains. Indicative of the growing popularity of this topic, a recent article in the Sunday supplement of the New York Times was devoted to wisdom (Hall, 2007).

We believe that the topic of wisdom should be of interest to the field of psychiatry too. This would include cross-cultural psychiatry as well as prevention and intervention in the area of successful aging. Vaillant (2002) considers wisdom to be an integral part of successful aging,

Corresponding author: Dilip V. Jeste, M.D., Estelle and Edgar Levi Chair in Aging, Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Neurosciences, Director, Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging, University of California, San Diego and VA San Diego Healthcare System, Bldg. 13, fourth floor, 3350 La Jolla Village Drive, San Diego, CA 92161., Phone: 858-534-4020, Fax: 858-552-7404, Email: djeste@ucsd.edu.

although he believes that one need not be old to acquire/possess wisdom. Blazer (2006) has proposed that promotion of wisdom should be an important part of facilitating successful aging, although evidence-based techniques or tools to affect wisdom are not available at this time. As empirical study of wisdom is presently in its nascent stages there may be an opportunity to incorporate culture-specific elements in our definition and understanding of this elusive concept, and thereby position ourselves to design possible “interventions” to help enhance wisdom in culturally appropriate ways.

Hindu philosophy is considered to be among the oldest schools of philosophy (Flood, 1996). Its exact origins are difficult to trace as written Indian philosophy is believed to be predated by centuries of an oral tradition (Avari, 2007; Bryant, 2001). The Vedas are the oldest of the ancient Hindu texts and have been dated to the second millennium BC (Witzel, 2003). These were written in Sanskrit; however, the oral Vedic tradition has been dated back as far as 10,000 BC (Sidharth, 1999).

In this article our aim is to examine similarities and differences between the concepts of wisdom in modern western versus ancient Indian literature. We see this as a useful first step in improving our understanding of wisdom. We focus on the Bhagavad (sometimes spelled as Bhagvad) Gita, commonly referred to as the Gita. The Gita is a later Hindu text than the Vedas, and is regarded by many scholars of Hinduism as a distillation of key Vedic concepts (Robinson, 2005a; Miller and Moser, 1986; Easwaran, 1985). It is arguably the most influential of all Hindu philosophical/religious texts (Easwaran, 1985), and is thought to provide a practical guide to implementation of Vedic wisdom in day-to-day life (Rosen, 2006). Large sections of the four primary Vedas (Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda) as well as the other Vedic texts (Upanishads, Aranyakas, Puranas) include hymns, religious rituals, sacrificial rites, incantations, and some treatises on medicine (Goodall, 1996). Therefore, the Gita is a more practical document than the Vedas for the purposes of interpreting the conceptualization of wisdom in ancient Hindu literature.

It is important to note that in its original form, the Gita is a religious text. Several verses in the text deal with topics related to devotion and interactions with God/the Divine. However, in addition to its religious/spiritual message, the Gita also has a broader and more secular dimension, and, as described below, its principles have been applied by scholars to a variety of non-religious endeavors as well (Sargeant, 1994; Sharma, 1999; Robinson, 2005a; Hall, 2007; Business week, 2007).

We should add that we do not claim to be scholars of the Hindu religion nor of Sanskrit language, but have some knowledge of both. This paper is not meant to be a general discourse or commentary on the Gita or on the Hindu philosophy or religion. Rather, we review the Gita as a source text for understanding ancient Hindu conceptualization of wisdom. We used mixed qualitative and quantitative methodology with the help of Textalyser and NVivo software to determine the domains specifically linked to wisdom in the Gita. Below, we first summarize the major modern views on wisdom, then describe the conceptualization of wisdom in the Gita, and finally, narrate similarities and differences between these two.

MODERN CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WISDOM

Modern conceptualization of wisdom is thought to be derived mainly from the Greek philosophy (Brugman, 2006), especially the writings of Socrates (469 - 399 BC) (Kofman, 1998), Plato (427 - 340s BC) (Hare, 1982), and Aristotle (384 - 322 BC) (Ross, 2004). Recent research on wisdom has focused more on theoretical aspects and definitions of wisdom than on empirical studies. There is no single consensual definition of wisdom, although there are several commonly identified elements. Erikson (1959) was one of the first psychologists to address wisdom as an important component of personality development. He designated

wisdom as a successful outcome of late-life development; however, he did not provide explicit definitions or constructs of wisdom. Baltes, probably the most prolific contemporary wisdom researcher, has referred to wisdom as the pinnacle of human achievement (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000; Baltes, Gluck, and Kunzmann, 2002; Baltes and Kunzmann, 2003; Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, and Smith, 1995). The Berlin Wisdom paradigm constructed by Baltes and colleagues (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000; Baltes et al., 2002; Baltes and Kunzmann, 2003; Baltes et al., 1995; Baltes, Smith, and Staudinger, 1992; Baltes, 2003) constitutes the most comprehensive work done in this area. It conceives wisdom as “expertise in the pragmatics of life, serving the good of oneself and others”. Baltes used a collection of 5 criteria (2 basic and 3 meta-criteria) to assess wisdom-related performance - rich factual knowledge, rich procedural knowledge, lifespan contextualism, relativism of values, exceptional insight, and management of uncertainty. Based on studies using these criteria, Baltes and colleagues concluded that wisdom was a rare quality (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000). Another prominent theory of wisdom is Sternberg’s balance theory (Brugman, 2006; Sternberg, 1998). In this view, a high level of practical intelligence (common sense) is the basis of wisdom, and is used to balance multiple factors and interests (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal) for the sake of common good. The Berlin Paradigm and the balance theory are referred to as the pragmatic theories. Complementing the pragmatic theories are the epistemic theories of wisdom, such as Brugman’s wisdom model (Brugman, 2006), which emphasize limitations of human knowledge, and the core of such models is an acknowledgment of uncertainty. They stress attitude toward knowledge, openness to new experience, and adaptability in the face of uncertainty.

Recent work by Ardelt (2004) and Carstensen (2006) emphasizes the role of emotional regulation. Ardelt (2004) believes that wisdom is better conceptualized as an integration of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality domains rather than just possession and implementation of expert knowledge as proposed in the Berlin paradigm. Carstensen (2006) has sought to integrate the domains of cognitive aging and socioemotional aging from the perspective of a motivational theory of lifespan development, although she does not use the term wisdom. Jason et al. (2001) incorporate harmony and warmth as well as spiritual elements and mysticism in the definition of wisdom. In summary, wisdom is a multidimensional construct, and there is a general agreement on several, though not all, of the domains involved. The domains common to a number of the modern theories of wisdom include: rich knowledge of life, emotional regulation, acknowledgement of and appropriate action in the face of uncertainty, personal well being, helping common good, and insight.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA

The Bhagavad Gita (literally meaning “The Song of the God or of the Divine One”) is a Sanskrit text from the epic Mahabharata. Lord Krishna as the narrator of the Bhagavad Gita, is referred to as the Bhagavan (the God or the Divine One), and the verses themselves are written in a poetic form that is traditionally chanted; hence the title (Johnsen, 2001). The Gita is revered as sacred by most Hindu traditions (Miller and Moser, 1986; Easwaran, 1985). The teachings of the Gita are narrated as a conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, a warrior prince, taking place on the battlefield of Kurukshetra just prior to the start of a climactic war. Responding to Arjuna’s confusion and moral dilemma about going to war with his evil cousins, Krishna explains to Arjuna his duties as a warrior and a prince. He tells Arjuna that, however personally abhorrent it may be, it is his societal duty to fight with and defeat his cousins’ army to ensure triumph of truth and freedom and well-being of common people. Importantly, Krishna elaborates on a number of philosophical tenets for everyday living, with examples and analogies. This has led to the Gita, which consists of 18 chapters, being described as a concise guide to Hindu philosophy and also as a practical, self-contained guide to life. In many ways seemingly a heterogeneous text, the Gita reconciles many facets and schools of Hindu

philosophy. The influence of the Gita extends well beyond India and the Hindu religion. Based on the Gita, specific models for administration, management, and leadership have been described (Sharma, 1999). A recent report in the Business Week magazine (Businessweek, 2007) suggests that, in the Western business community, the Gita is replacing the influence of the “Art of War”, an ancient Chinese political text dated to approximately 500 BC that described how victory could be assured in war (Duyvendak et.al., 1998).

As with almost every major ancient religious text in India, the exact date of composition of the Gita is not known with certainty. Zaehner concludes that it was written later than the ‘classical’ Upanishads; it was probably written some time between the fifth and second centuries BC (Zaehner, 1973). Some scholars have dated the parent text - the Mahabharata - to be older, and estimate that the content of the Gita as a text was inserted into the Mahabharata around 500 BC (Robinson, 2005a). Different translators and commentators have somewhat differing views on what multi-layered Sanskrit words and passages in the Gita signify. Similarly, there are some differences of opinion among scholars on the relative importance of various aspects of philosophy emphasized in the Gita (e.g., commitment to work versus love of god) (Easwaran, 1985; Gambhirananda, 2003). In modern times notable commentaries on the Gita were written by two major socio-political leaders, Tilak and Gandhi, who used the text to help inspire the Indian independence movement (Sargeant, 1994). While noting that the Gita taught several possible paths to liberation, Tilak highlighted the emphasis on Karma Yoga (work) in the Gita (Robinson, 2005b). Gandhi, who has been one of the most common nominees as a wise person across the world (Hall, 2007), wrote: “When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone I see not one ray of light, I go back to the Bhagavad Gita. I find a verse here and a verse there, and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies - and my life has been full of external tragedies - and if they have left no visible or indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teaching of Bhagavad Gita” (Gandhi, 1925; Gandhi, 2007).

WISDOM AS CONCEPTUALIZED IN THE GITA

Methods

In order to examine the concept of wisdom as elaborated in the Gita, the two authors performed an independent review of each of two major English translations. We reviewed the direct translations of the Sanskrit text of the Gita rather than the scholarly commentaries as we felt that such commentaries would be biased by subjective opinions of those commentators. We chose the translation by R. C. Zaehner (a westerner with scholarship in Sanskrit) revised and edited by Goodall (1996), and another by Swami Nirmalananda Giri (2007), an Indian scholar of Hinduism. An added advantage of the latter translation was that it was also available in an electronic format, allowing us to analyze its text using electronic software. There were some differences in grammar and syntax between the Zaehner and Giri translations; however, such variations were not seen to have any significant impact on the essential meaning of the text conveyed.

To select search words for our analysis of the text of the Gita, we used the Oxford English Dictionary (2007), which defines wisdom as “the quality of being wise.” We also used Roget’s New Millennium Thesaurus (2007) and searched for synonyms of ‘wisdom’, and ‘wise’, and ‘wise man’. The synonym that was most commonly employed was ‘sage’ (or its adjective form ‘sagacious’). Next, we analyzed the text of the translations of the Gita electronically using the ‘Textalyser’ (2007), an electronic text-mining tool. We found that the words ‘wisdom’, ‘wise’, and ‘sage’ appeared (usually separately) in the text of the Gita a combined average of 71 times in the Zaehner and Giri translations.

Based on our literature review of wisdom as well as our reading of the Gita, we prepared a list of various possible domains of wisdom (e.g., knowledge, emotional regulation, insight) that

had been described. Verses in the Gita in which the words “wisdom”, “wise”, or “sage” were used were then re-read by each author independently to identify the specific domain/s pertaining to each verse. Based on this, we identified 10 domains of wisdom in the Gita. We also found that multiple other verses elaborated on these same domains, although they did not use the words “wisdom”, “wise”, or “sage”. Such verses were also included in the following analyses. To quantify the relative importance of the individual domains as described in the Gita, we performed an analysis of the text of the electronic version of the Giri (Ashram, 2007) translation using QSR NVivo (Fraser, 2000), Version 2.0, which is the software designed to facilitate mixed qualitative/quantitative text analysis. We employed the method of “Coding Consensus, Co-occurrence, and Comparison” outlined by Willms et al. (1992) as follows. First, the verses were independently coded (assigned specific domains) by the authors. In some instances, the same verse could be assigned more than one code or domain. The authors agreed on the codes 92% of the time, indicating good inter-rater reliability in qualitative research (Boyatzis, 1988). Disagreements in assignment of codes were resolved through discussions between the two authors.

In order to validate our use of English words to elucidate concepts that were originally conveyed in Sanskrit, we utilized the method of reverse translation. Initially we employed the Cologne Digital Sanskrit Lexicon (2006) to generate a list of Sanskrit synonyms for the words ‘wisdom’, ‘wise’ and ‘sage’. Next, we used an online resource provided by the Bhagavad-Gita Trust (1998), which allowed us to compare each verse of the text in English and Sanskrit simultaneously. With this, we made a list of words used in the Sanskrit text of the Gita that were translated as ‘wisdom’, ‘wise’ or ‘sage’ in the English versions employed in our original analysis. This list was then compared with the list of synonyms obtained using the Cologne Sanskrit lexicon. We found a 100% match between the list of Sanskrit words used in the Gita and the list of synonyms for those keywords.

Once we coded the electronic Giri translation, we compared it with the Zaehner translation (Goodall, 1996). There was a 100% match between the two translations in terms of the specific domain/s covered by individual verses, though there were minor differences in the order of word usage, syntax, and grammar. The frequencies of the verses specifying specific domains of wisdom were then counted. The 10 domains we identified (with the number of verses related to each domain given in parentheses) were as follows: Knowledge of life (28 verses), Emotional Regulation (20 verses), Control over Desires (20 verses), Decisiveness (20 verses), Love of God (19 verses), Duty and Work (14 verses), Self-Contentedness (13 verses), Yoga or Integration of Personality (12 verses), Compassion/Sacrifice (8 verses), and Insight/Humility (7 verses).

Domains of Wisdom Described in the Gita

For each domain, we begin with an illustrative quote from the Gita in italics (Goodall, 1996) and then summarize its description as given in the text.

(1) Knowledge of life—“Whoso possesses wisdom’s eye sees indeed” (Ch.15 v.10).

Knowledge is regarded as a great virtue, but the Gita assigns different qualities and importance to different types of knowledge. The highest level of knowledge equated with wisdom is the ability to differentiate the perishable (worldly or material) from the imperishable (sublime) things.

(2) Emotional Regulation—“(Anger, desire) the Wise man’s eternal foe; By this is wisdom overcast” (Ch.3, v.39).

The Gita considers equanimity as an essential virtue. Wise people are characterized by a lack of negative or extreme positive emotions. Wisdom implies that events of joy or sadness are treated similarly. However, satisfaction with a job well done is considered appropriate.

(3) Control over Desires—“Whose senses are withheld from objects proper to them...firm-stabilised is the wisdom of such a man” (Ch.2 v.68).

“A man of faith, intent on wisdom, his senses all restrained, will wisdom win...” (Ch 4, v.39).

A lack of preoccupation with sensual pleasure is highly valued. Various nuances of this quality - self-restraint, moderation, detachment from desire, and renunciation of attachments and of material ties are elaborated in various sections. A “yogi” is described as one who is free of material ties and is moderate in his actions and reactions.

(4) Decisiveness—“And so, take up the sword of wisdom, cut this doubt of thine, unwisdom’s child still lurking in thy heart: Prepare for action now. Stand up!” (Ch 4, v.42).

“No part in this world has the man of doubt, nor in the next, nor yet in happiness.” (Ch 4 v.40)

A wise person is one of steadied thought and certain in his understanding. Lack of ambivalence is equated with decisiveness, and differentiated from a deluding self-conviction. It is also equated with an understanding of absence of duality and dichotomy in the world.

(5) Love of and Faith in the God—“Let him (a wise man) sit intent on Me (God)...” (Ch 2, v.61)

Being a religious text, the Gita dwells on the close relationship between wisdom and faith in the God. Meditation with concentration and spiritual exercise are described as a way of controlling the mind and promoting several of the qualities discussed in this section. Emphasizing the spiritual dimension, regular meditation is recommended as a tool for achieving as well as maintaining wisdom.

(6) Duty and work—“For men of action wisdom is the yoga of works.” (Ch.3 v.3)

Also called ‘karma’, the Gita describes a wise man as one who is committed to his or her duty in the society. A commitment to work and maintaining discipline with respect to work constitute an important component of wisdom. An integral element of ‘karma’ is doing work for the sake of work. According to the Gita, a wise person works in order to discharge his/her responsibilities to the society, and not for the sake of its material rewards. Different types of work are described in terms of caste- appropriate roles; however, these descriptions need to be viewed within the socio-historical context of the period. The Gita stresses that no work done in order to keep a person appropriately productive should be considered “bad.”

(7) Self-contentedness—“Detached from contacts with the outside world, in self he (a wise person) finds his joy (sukha).” (Ch 5, v.21)

A wise person is described as one who is self-assured, and demonstrates non-dependence on others.

(8) Compassion and Sacrifice—“Steadfast in the yoga of wisdom, restrained and open-handed, performing sacrifice...” (Ch 16 v.1)

A wise person is compassionate. Sacrifice, for the sake of sacrifice, and not for its material rewards, is also an element of wisdom. Helping others, acts of kindness and charity, and doing no harm to others are tied in to this as well

(9) Insight/Humility—“Let him (a wise man) give up all thought of ‘I’, force, pride...” (Ch. 18, v.53)

A wise person is aware of his/her own limitations including mortality and relative unimportance in the broader realm of the universe at large. Humility and a lack of narcissism are, therefore, critical elements of wisdom.

(10) Yoga (Integration)—“Perfection found, is wisdom’s highest goal; Let a man be integrated by his soul...restrain himself with constancy...abandon things of sense...passion and hate cast out...” (Ch.18, v 50-52)

The ability to integrate multiple other components of wisdom (described above) and to practice these to the benefit of those around is regarded as the most valued component of wisdom. Yoga includes practicing what one preaches, illustrating a lack of hypocrisy. (Hypocrisy is described as a virtue of fools).

Implied Component

Acknowledging and managing uncertainty is an important element of several modern concepts of wisdom (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000; Ardel, 2004). The Gita does not refer to this element specifically. However, the entire treatise of the Gita is based on solving Arjuna’s dilemma between not wanting to battle with his cousins and yet, recognizing the need for a war with them because of their evil deeds. In advising Arjuna on the right course of action, Krishna acknowledges the problem, but suggests that duty and work are more important than personal feelings, and calls for action without ambivalence.

Levels of Wisdom

The Gita describes a range of levels of wisdom. An individual’s level of wisdom could be nil or negative (indulgence in “devil or dark ways”), low (indulgence in “passion or selfish and foolish ways”), moderate (“goodness”), or the highest possible (with status of “yogi.”) Yogis are rare: “*Among thousands of men but one, maybe, will strive for self perfection*” (Ch. 7, v. 3). Yogis are described as follows:

“Upward is the path of those who abide in Goodness, in the middle stand men of Passion, Stuck in the modes of vilest constituent, the men of Darkness go below.” - Ch 14, v.18

“Higher than the mere ascetic, higher than the man of wisdom, higher than the man of works is the Yogin held to be.” - Ch.6 v.46

Components of Wisdom can be taught and learned

An important and noteworthy concept in the Gita, usually not considered in the modern literature, is that wisdom (or at least some components of it) can be improved through teaching. The Gita itself constitutes an example of how wisdom may be taught and learned, as the narrative of the Gita is a lesson in wisdom taught by Lord Krishna to Arjuna. While Arjuna already possessed several elements of wisdom such as knowledge, compassion and sacrifice, insight/humility, he was markedly ambivalent about fighting with his family members even though he knew that they had evil motives and methods. Krishna helped Arjuna solve his moral dilemma by emphasizing duty over feelings. In the process, Krishna also sought to teach Arjuna various other facets of wisdom in everyday life. The Gita stresses that active effort is required

to learn wisdom. Any person, irrespective of gender or caste, can become wiser, and no case is considered hopeless from this perspective. (*"For whosoever makes Me (God) his haven, base born though he may be; Yes, women too, and artisans, even serfs - Theirs it is to tread the highest way "* - Ch 9, v.32).

COMPARISON OF THE CONCEPT OF WISDOM IN THE GITA WITH MODERN CONCEPTS

Can we compare the concept of wisdom in the Gita with the modern western concepts? It may be argued that the Gita exemplifies the cultural psychology of traditional India and makes sense there, and that its teachings are dependent on a theosophical tradition that is anchored in an ancient system of values, attitudes, and behavior that may be discrepant with the ethos of modern life and, especially the western culture. Indeed, as we mention earlier in this paper, the Gita could be viewed as primarily a religious text with a deep-rooted cultural resonance. However, we should also point out that a number of Indian scholars of Hinduism and the Gita have written extensively on the meaningfulness of the teachings of the Gita for modern lifestyle (e.g., Munshi (1962), Vivekananda (2003)). Similarly, several western writers on spirituality have commented on the relevance of the Gita for western cultures (e.g., Steiner (2007)) In many ways, most teachings of the Gita have a universal applicability (similar to some of the classical texts in other religions) as they transcend temporal, geographic, and cultural barriers."

The domains common to a number of the modern theories of wisdom include: rich knowledge of life, emotional regulation, acknowledgement of and appropriate action in the face of uncertainty, personal well being, helping common good, and insight. A comparison of the conceptualization of wisdom in the Gita with the modern scientific literature shows several similarities, such as rich knowledge about life, emotional regulation, contributing to common good (compassion/sacrifice), and insight (with a focus on humility). The basic goal promoted in the Gita is that of rich knowledge of life in a broad sense (realizing one's personal limits within the context of the large universe) leading to humility, and at the same time, fulfilling obligations toward others through appropriate work that enhances societal well being rather than serving one's own narrow personal interests. This requires regulation of emotions so that rational social judgment supersedes one's selfish needs. Living in the face of uncertainty and understanding real and potential conflicts between personal and societal goals is essential; however, such moral or practical dilemmas should lead, not to inaction, but to well chosen and decisive action. It is remarkable that the basic concept of wisdom described thousands of years ago in one corner of the world resonates so well with modern conceptualization of wisdom.

At the same time, there are some interesting differences between the ancient Hindu philosophy and modern western view of wisdom. These include an emphasis in the Gita on control over senses (renunciation of materialistic pleasures) and complete faith in the God. The Gita stresses control over desires and avoidance of material pleasures. It stresses doing work (or even sacrifice) for the sake of duty rather than for obtaining personal rewards, except that self-contentedness resulting from fulfillment of one's responsibilities is considered appropriate. In contrast, modern western authors place a greater emphasis on personal well being as an important goal of life (Brugman, 2006). This difference in perspectives is consistent with Takahashi's (2000) conclusion that eastern philosophy de-emphasizes the material world whereas the western thinking values personal well being.

The Gita highlights the role of faith in and love of the God. (This is similar to the ancient western religious writings on wisdom including the Bible (Assmann, 1994)). In contrast, religiosity is mentioned only fleetingly in most modern western schools of wisdom such as the Berlin wisdom paradigm and epistemic theories of wisdom. There are, however, some such as Jason et al. (2001) who have incorporated spiritual elements and mysticism in defining wisdom.

We should also mention that there is some debate among scholars of the Gita about the relative importance given to religiosity versus work. Whereas Hindu religious leaders (e.g. Vivekananda (2003)) stressed the role of faith in the God, socio-political leaders including Tilak and Gandhi emphasized the value of work (Sargeant, 1994). These and other national leaders used the Gita as a guide in carrying out the movement for India's independence from the British empire during the early and middle parts of the last century.

There is a difference of opinion among modern researchers of wisdom in terms of the relative "prevalence" of wise persons. Baltes and colleagues (2000) viewed wisdom as a rare 'utopian' trait, whereas work by Smith (1995) seems to suggest that while not a common trait, there may be different levels of wisdom in different people, based on their life-experiences and social roles. The Gita points out that there is a range of levels of wisdom from nil or negative to the highest (a yogi with total integration of personality), with Yogis being rare.

Importantly, the Gita suggests that at least some elements of wisdom can be taught and learned. The teaching of wisdom has received little empirical attention in modern research on this topic. According to the Gita, the learning of wisdom can facilitate a progression from a lower to a higher level, culminating in achieving the status of a "yogi." The role of experience is highlighted, as experience can help one progress to a higher status of wisdom. Some recent papers discuss the role of adverse experiences in learning wisdom (Ardelt, 2004; Gluck et. al. 2005), but not necessarily in the context of training people in developing wisdom.

The issue of the relationship of wisdom to old age is an unresolved one. The concept of wisdom should be relevant to adults of all ages, although traditionally wisdom has been associated with older people in most societies (Assmann, 1994; Holiday and Chandler, 1986; Baltes and Smith, 1990). Erikson (1959) implied that wisdom was a final stage of personality development attained in late life as a result of positively resolving the psychosocial crisis between ego integrity and despair. Wise older people are expected to age more successfully than those without wisdom (Baltes and Smith, 1990). On the one hand, old age is associated with common stressors such as physical disability, cognitive decline, financial difficulties, and losses of loved ones. On the other hand, with increasing experience, there is often greater emotional balance, contentment with life, and a theosophical approach that corresponds to wisdom. Both the Gita and modern literature stress the importance of experience in the development of wisdom. This would indicate a positive association of old age with wisdom, in view of aging-associated increase in experiences. Whereas the Gita does not specifically refer to such a relationship of wisdom to age, other Indian literature on philosophy and religion indicates that older people are generally considered wiser than their younger counterparts (Bhat and Dhruvarajan, 2001; Jamuna, 2000). Yet, modern empirical research does not support a significant relationship between aging and wisdom (Brugman, 2006). A possible reason for the latter finding could be that wisdom is not an automatic consequence of experiences or of aging per se, and that only those older people who have used their experiences optimally may acquire more wisdom with aging.

RELEVANCE OF THE CONCEPTS OF WISDOM IN THE GITA TO MODERN PSYCHIATRY

It may be argued that the Gita exemplifies the cultural psychology of traditional India and makes sense there, and that its teachings are dependent on a theosophical tradition that is anchored in an ancient system of values, attitudes, and behavior that may be discrepant with the ethos of modern life and, especially the western culture. Indeed, as we mention earlier in this paper, the Gita could be viewed as primarily a religious text with a deep-rooted cultural resonance. However, we should also point out that a number of Indian scholars of Hinduism and the Gita have written extensively on the meaningfulness of the teachings of the Gita for

modern lifestyle (e.g., Munshi (1962), Vivekananda (2003)). Similarly, several western writers on spirituality have commented on the relevance of the Gita for western cultures (e.g., Steiner (2007)). In many ways, most teachings of the Gita have a universal applicability (similar to some of the classical texts in other religions) as they transcend temporal, geographic, and cultural barriers.

Modern clinical psychiatry has been criticized for its lack of success in promoting patients' well-being despite major strides in psychopharmacology and evidence-based psychotherapy (Cloninger, 2006; Myers and Diener, 1996). One criticism of some of the current psychotherapeutic approaches is that these tend to be reductionistic and somewhat impersonal. The Gita suggests a more individualistic as well as a more holistic approach that could lead to development of psychotherapeutic interventions focusing on enhancing personal well-being rather than just psychiatric symptoms. Two of the main themes promoted in the Gita are spirituality and work. Although relatively little scientific attention was paid to these domains in previous psychiatric literature, empirical data collected in recent years point to the importance of both these dimensions. Thus, it has been reported that clinicians are increasingly recognizing the relationship between greater spiritual awareness and improved outcomes (D'Souza, 2007). Koenig (2007) found that older patients with medical illness and depression were less likely to be religiously involved than those without depression as well as those with milder depression. Similarly, the importance of 'work' across the lifespan and despite disabling psychiatric illnesses can be inferred from recent research suggesting that vocational rehabilitation improves outcomes even in older persons with very chronic schizophrenia (Twamley et.al., 2005). Literature in these and other areas related to different dimensions of wisdom is growing, but remains scattered and unconnected. Evaluating these studies through the wisdom paradigm may point to novel connections among concepts of work, spirituality, well-being, and successful outcomes. This can also be the ground for devising interventions promoting broader well-being as suggested by Cloninger (2006).

Studies of wisdom would seem to have considerable relevance for psychiatry. While it may be challenging to develop interventions aimed at promoting a multi-dimensional construct such as wisdom, it is reasonable to suggest that interventions aimed at improving specific dimensions of wisdom may enhance outcomes in mentally ill persons. The concept of wisdom may indeed be useful to psychiatry as an 'umbrella' under which several novel approaches for improving the outcome in mentally ill persons can be grouped and used as a foundation for creating integrated models of remission and recovery.

Finally, studies of cross-cultural comparisons of concepts of wisdom would be particularly helpful, as they may have implications for developing possible interventions to enhance wisdom as a means of facilitating successful aging in a culture-specific manner. Additionally, combining elements of wisdom from various cultures could yield a more comprehensive and effective means of promoting wisdom.

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