Disposition towards experience

"Practical wisdom is a fruit which can only grow in the soil of a person's experience and character……apart from this there is no other way of making it available in any way that would count"
[Joseph Dunne]

"That which we most need to learn before doing, we can only learn, by doing" [John Dewey]

The world around you is an incomparable classroom and, for the development of practical wisdom, it is the only one available. Practical wisdom is only gained through experience. Sadly, however, one can have had much experience, and have gathered little experience – one might live long but learn little! A C.V. shows a list of experiences – it does not demonstrate any experience.

Wisdom does not simply come with age – its underpinning dispositions and constituent capabilities are only developed if an **appropriate disposition to one's experience** is acquired. To gain learning from one's experience one has to have a certain form of engagement with one's lived experience - you must have a learning disposition. **It is your experiencing that counts, not your experience**!

To learn from one's experiences, one first has to be **present and attentive** – one has to relish and savour it as the invaluable resource that it is. One must value it, and not let it slip through one's fingers – you must squeeze the juice out of it – you must **'live in the moment'** in the true Buddhist sense. If one is to gain all the learning possible from an experience one must be **deeply engaged in the prevailing circumstance** – one must have focussed attention. You must have the form of reflexive attention that allows the particularities of circumstances to reveal themselves, and not only the comfortable similarities.

We must attend in this way, not only to the content of the work to hand, but to our conduct and that of others. Without deliberate action it is easy to allow the content of your/the work to be the only focus of attention and to let huge process/conduct learning opportunities pass one by.

It is easy to become comfortably numb and not pay **inquisitive attention to what is going on**. This is because much of what we do, why we do it, and with whom we do it, at 'first sight' stays the same – and as a result we only ever have 'first sight', not insight and learning! You must strive always to be questioning of yourself and your conduct in the pertaining circumstances – no matter their familiarity. Past high performance and success can generate hubris and de-sensitise one to learning possibilities. One must seek to deploy the **Zen beginner's mind**, and let one's prior learning/experience only be a powerful resource, and not allow it to become a trap. A mindful manager is reflexive in their experiencing, and struggles with the spectacles through which they see their experience!

The wise one – though far from being a beginner – strives for a beginner's mind – and attempts to approach familiar things as if they were being approached for the first time, but s/he must also proactively seek unfamiliar territory, diversity and disruption to his/her habits. The mindful manager seeks difficulty, risks & stretches his/herself and goes where s/he is uncomfortable. You must be a **resilient learner** – **learn to fail you or you will fail to learn**.

If there is no risk of failing, the stretch is not enough. One has to be able to cope with one's own incompetence, and be resilient enough to handle failing in the sight of one's peers & subordinates – maybe even in front of one's boss. It will often take courage to learn from experience. One must do new things, and do things in new ways, if one is to pursue the path to practical wisdom.

Peter Lerner - Mindful Manager - Peter Lerner