

**Lessons That Linger**

*Life lessons learnt at 65*

**Shankar Jaganathan**

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### ***Acknowledgement***

*The painting on the cover of this booklet is by my nephew Arvind Prabat Shankar. Thanks for letting me use it. My thanks to all my friends and family who have provided me valuable feedback to see what I have missed and their generous encouragement.*

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## ***Lessons That Linger***

***Thank you all for my birthday wishes.***

On the occasion of my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, I am taking stock of some lessons learnt. This is a result of my desire for lifelong learning. I am capturing some **Lessons that Lingers** with me. The aim is to share my learnings by articulating it for reflection and seek my well-wishers' critical feedback.

I plan to share 52 lessons that constantly lingers in my mind. Fifty-two has no other significance than the number of weeks in a year or the playing cards in a deck. Like seasons in a year or suites in playing cards, my reflections are from personal, social, commercial and generic domains.

Thank you in advance for your time. I will be sharing it one a day starting tomorrow on My Facebook page and my website [www.shankarjagansworld.com](http://www.shankarjagansworld.com). I will be thrilled to hear your views on my learnings. Please share them as comments on these posts, or WhatsApp message, or in an email to me at [shankar.jaganathan@gmail.com](mailto:shankar.jaganathan@gmail.com). I hope we can refine our learnings.

With warm regards,

**Shankar Jaganathan**  
**August 21, 2025**



## 1. My Constitution

Countries have their own constitution, so I wonder why not have a constitution written for me. A constitution to define who I am and commit to state my core beliefs. It would spell out my values and etch out my self-imposed restraints. The “directive principles” laid out in the constitution would help me govern my conduct and identify violations as and when they arise.

In addition to directive principles, a constitution would define the executive, the legislature, citizens who elect the parliamentarians and the justice system to enforce it. I imagine my five senses constituting the Executive, proposing decisions for consideration, and my heart being the Parliament, the venue for decisive debates. My conscience, would be the ultimate stake-holder objecting to any unconstitutional behaviour it perceives and brings it to the attention of the Supreme Court, my rational mind.

As courts are expected to do, my mind too would deliver an unbiased judgement and where required, mete out punishment, without any fear or favour. This court too should stand the scrutiny of its citizen, my conscience. While in public life justice delayed is justice denied, for me I believe as it is for my personal benefit, justice—better late than never.

Like England, which has an unwritten constitution, many people I know have an unwritten one governing their lives. Wanting to reflect, here is my humble attempt to pen my constitution.

My preamble would read

“I, Shankar Jaganathan consciously decide that all my conduct will be in the true spirit of a global citizen, treating every individual with respect and fairness, the same way I would like to be treated, and exert all my energy to fully realise all elements of my potential while being conscious of my social responsibility to the current and future generations.”

The five directive principles to govern my life:

- I. **You get what you give:** Life is like a mirror. You see yourself in others and get only what you give.
- II. **Less needs means more freedom:** Travellers choosing comfort travel light. Do with less to do more.
- III. **Live in the Present:** Look back only to learn, and look ahead only to plan. Regret and worrying is optional.
- IV. **Value-add begets rewards:** Work to add value, don't chase rewards. As rewards seek contributors.
- V. **Beliefs drive behaviour:** Change is the only constant. Adapt yourself by modifying your beliefs.

I am often called an idealist. As an optimist, I don't see any downsides in it. I see any failure to abide by my own principles as an exception and not the rule. I was not sure if I had the courage to publicly share these beliefs and live by it. But as I turn 65 today, I believe it is as good a day as any other to start.

A sincere request to my well-wishers, like the discerning media, please give a shout when you see me deviate, as constructive feedback is my need.



## 2. Value Labels

Our society consists of people with different belief systems. Artificial Intelligence (AI) dominating many conversations today reflect this difference. Some believe AI can usher in Utopia, while others see doom and gloom. Can our deep underlying belief about the direction of progress explain this divide? Does a conservative or a progressive belief explain this divide?

- **Conservatives:** Believe in a glorious past deteriorating with time, from a golden age to the current corrupting world. This belief prompts efforts to restore the past glory by resurrecting traditional practices. Hence, it shuns innovation or change, as it sees them accelerating this deterioration.
- **Progressives:** In contrast, progressives, also called the liberals view an evolving better future: from savages to civilisation. A belief that future will be better and hence welcome innovation and change.

The contrasting positions of the two views was historically seen in the changing role of women in society, and in more recent times it manifests in emerging issues like AI and space travel; enablers or destroyers of human potential.

On the economic front, based on the role of individuals in social groups, two distinct belief systems exist, labelled the left and the right wingers.

- **Left-wingers**— This belief is in line with the herd behaviour of herbivorous animals. Happiness and security of an individual is seen to be derived from the group. It is in the groups' interest to ensure no individual is left behind, as **a chain is only as strong as its weakest link**. Leftists are seen supporting issues like human rights, abolition of death penalty and green movements. They believe individual interest is subservient to the group.

- **Right-wingers**– Similar to packs seen of carnivorous animals, where happiness and security of the group is a collection of individuals' happiness. A group's strength is determined by the strength of its strongest individual. Right wingers support commercialisation and free trade. For them individuals' interest is of paramount importance, and the groups' role is to enable individuals to act unrestrained.

The contrasting positions of these two is seen in their value anchors: private property and reason attributed to individual achievements. Right-wingers give property rights the highest status and credit an individual's talent as the primary reason for their achievements. While the left-wingers place human welfare over private property, and credit the environment and support systems for an individual achievement.

Labels help in predicting how people react to emerging issues. On all, if not most issues, I see myself as a progressive, left winger. What about you? Test cricket or 20-20!



### 3. Mortality -A Few Thoughts

Post-retirement in the last two years, every month has been marked by my visits to crematorium. It made me realise the obvious fact that death is the only certainty for all born on this earth. I can add from my personal experience that growing older, we come across more deaths in our family and friends' circles often triggering thoughts on mortality. While all deaths are painful and

distressing as we lose the person we love and respect, some deaths cause more pain, especially where the deceased is young, or had undergone long periods of suffering or has young family dependants.

Reflecting on our mortality, the immediate causes of involuntary death<sup>#</sup> can be only one of the three:

- i. **Disease** -As the word denotes, dis-ease is the absence of ease. In its milder form disease causes discomfort or pain, and in its most acute form causes death. Accounting for almost 2/3rds of global death, heart, cancer and respiratory diseases are the top 3 causes.
- ii. **Trauma** – An accident or a catastrophe can also cause death. While accidents like road or air accidents lead to death on a limited scale, catastrophes cause large-scale deaths be it natural disasters like a cyclone, earthquake or the recent cases of cloudbursts or man-made wars. Accounting for around 7% of global deaths, it is the cause most in news.
- iii. **Aging** -The gradual deterioration of human body with time that results in one or more of the vital organs ceasing to function. Individuals not afflicted by disease or trauma die of aging. Only more than a quarter of the population are fortunate to die to aging.

While disease and trauma are avoidable, and technology is ensuring that their impact is minimised, death due to aging is inevitable even if attempts are being made to delay it. The best one can pray for is a peaceful and painless death, after the individual has fulfilled their worldly responsibilities.

To all those dead, Om Shanti. For the living, a long life, or for myself whatever the future beholds!

# Causes of involuntary death consciously ignored are of murder and suicide, both results of psychological disorders accounting for about 2% of the deaths.



#### 4. Consumers to Creators

Browsing the mobile has replaced our earlier habit of scanning newspaper headlines. Often some types of headlines catch our attention more than others. On reflection, we see similar items that make news every day. With social media, there is a big change: we have morphed from being a consumer to creators of news.

Here is my stock-take of what makes news to help us engage better with our audience.

Criteria for newsworthiness is the same, whether for traditional media like print, TV or radio, or the new age social media channels like X, Instagram, WhatsApp or Facebook. A newsworthy item needs to pass through one or more of these five filters. More categories it ticks, the more newsworthy it is in engaging the audience:

- i. **Milestones**-like an individual's birthdays or wedding anniversaries, or an institution's silver or golden jubilee, or a country's independence-day, they are newsworthy as these milestones are occasions for reflection & stocktake, goal-setting & festivities.
- ii. **Exceptional or unnatural**-Scandals, celebrity gossip, accidents or catastrophes both natural and man-made like wars make news by appealing to the baser human instincts of fear, lust, envy, greed and pride.
- iii. **Outrage**- issues firing up emotions are newsworthy in contrast to issues needing thought. Making the blood boil, or the eyes go soft with tears is news. Emotions evoked by the sight of a child fighting for its life is more newsworthy than lakhs of children facing a slow and sure death due to malnutrition or who are denied basic healthcare. Outrage scores over damage, emotions over reason when it comes to capturing human attention.

- iv. **Forecast-** Any grand forecast or doomsday prediction is news irrespective of its feasibility. More outrageous the prediction, less credible it needs to be. Hence target setting and D-dates announcement fires up public imagination or ignites heated debates keeping the issue alive.
- v. **Origin-** Providing new insights into the origin of almost anything is news, especially if it feeds the pride of a clan. An achievement credited to an individual, family, nation, community or religion by appealing to their pride feeds our collective ego making it news, worthy of celebration and patting each-others back.

To be in news, or to create news ensure that you tick one of the five boxes; more the better.



## 5. The Altruists: My Heros

They say you admire what you are not, and I can vouch for it. For a person who has trouble giving away an old ill-fitting pants, people like Mother Theresa and Azim Premji amaze me. Their self-less behaviour is inspirational and appeals to my heart as they are an exception where the norm for personal behaviour is to be selfish if not self-centred. While all self-less acts

appeal to me, I am intrigued and enamoured by what triggers charity and how it evolves into philanthropy. Further meeting people who embody sensitivity by engaging themselves in alleviating human suffering as a way of their life irrespective of their personal discomforts triggers a reflective mood born of sheer admiration.

**Charity**-as the etymology of the word suggests, charity is derived from the Latin word *caritas* meaning care, dearness or affection. Charity is an individual's response to an emotional appeal for help to provides solace to a suffering individual or a group facing survival threat. The most common form of charity we see is alms provided to the hungry and sick, or contributions made to provide relief to victims of natural or man-made calamities.

**Philanthropy** -derived from the Greek words meaning love of mankind, philanthropy combines the emotional spark of charity and sustains it with a deeper reflection fueled by the intellect. The aim is to eliminate human suffering for a larger group, with continuing efforts. Charitable hospitals, orphanages, old-age homes, and educational institutions are the most visible forms of philanthropy.

**Ethical conduct**-Arising from within, i.e. ethos, ethical conduct is based on the character of an individual who is sensitive to human needs and works to alleviate human suffering. Gurudwara, the Sikh's place of worship, that feeds everyone without discrimination is the most enduring and visible institutional example. At an individual level, self-less professionals like doctors, lawyers

and teachers providing their services to the most deserving members of our society ignoring their own commercial benefits exemplify it.

In an increasingly commercial world, I believe there is none in our society who is untouched by and has not benefited from altruistic acts of others in our society. I pray that appreciation is only the first step of many more I need to take for me to internalise their value.



## 6. Social Interactions

On retirement, the common knowledge that man is a social animal became my personal realisation. As the opportunity for daily interaction with people declined, I began to eagerly look forward to social occasions where I meet people. Returning from these events, in reflective mood I could see four distinct types of interaction that dominated different stages of human life.

- i. **Need-based or Clannish-** Born in a family, a baby's first interactions are with family members based on family norms and values built on love. As the basic social unit changes from joint families to nuclear families and individuals, the extent and duration of family interaction where love is the primary currency reduces with these changes.
- ii. **Interest centric or Community based-** Growing up, the child enters the community, where interactions are based on interest groups like sports, arts or education. Here the strength of the relationship is based on interest levels exhibited by individuals.
- iii. **Need based or Bureaucratic** –Entering adolescence the child encounters social institutions, which are formal rule-based organisations run by individuals authorised to impose the rules. These institutions are impersonal as their rules governing them.
- iv. **Self-centred or Markets based** -in most if not all societies commercial contracts can be entered into only by an adult. This ushers in the commercial world of markets. In markets, only self-interest prevails as money talks in the language of commerce.

The child gradually moves from personal interactions based on love, to love supplemented by common interests, to impersonal rule-based organisation and finally the markets, where only self-interest prevails. I am now able to appreciate the view why senior citizens are considered more like children as their interactions recede back to their childhood state.

To lead a happy life, we need to use the right glue in our interaction. Do you agree?



## 7. Roots of Wellbeing

Feeling good is a basic need for a happy life. Like the five fingers in our hand, I see human wellbeing too rooted in five essential elements:

i. **Physical wellbeing-** is the starting point. At the base, it is being at ease, i.e. without disease. The next level is to be fit for what we like to do. It is a relative state varying based on an individual's desire, as fitness is for a defined purpose only.

The third level is to excel in whatever we do. Excel in my definition is wanting to be better than you were yesterday, and to be the best you can be.

- ii. **Purpose-**waking up with a desire to do something, anything, is what makes every day a present, i.e. a gift we give ourselves. Sustaining this urge right through the day makes our life meaningful and fulfilling.
- iii. **Gratitude** -A physically active and purposeful individual has travelled half the way to feel valued. A deep sense of gratitude for their good fortune completes the journey.
- iv. **Social connections** -We live in families and with our friends. Our interactions enlarge our life. A genuine interest in people around us, to feel their joy and sorrow as our own, enriches our lives as we live not just our lives but theirs too.
- v. **Contribution** -Our efforts is what makes it our own. Assisting people around us whenever we can, even if it is only a wish or a prayer, makes not just us but people around us also happy. In giving others, we give to ourselves.

Irrespective of the cards we are dealt with in our life, I feel our well-being is in our own hands based on how we react. The five fingers on our hand are a constant reminder of the five elements to realise it. They say thumb is the most critical finger. Which of these five elements is your thumb?



## 8.The Elastic String of Consumption

Starting a day without sipping coffee for me is unimaginable. Starting with coffee the list of what I consume daily almost looks endless. While consumption is essential for life, I am not sure if my cup of coffee is essential or an indulgence. Further, my consumption is not just to meet physical needs but more of it addresses my psychological needs like the You-tube

subscription for ad-free music. Analysing my consumption, I see it in four baskets, of physical and psychological goods, further divided into basic essential needs and evolved indulgences or wants.

**Physical needs:** Food, clothing and shelter are human needs we cannot do without. In modern urban life clean air, pure water, and basic sanitation enter the list. While these are not new, it was taken for granted earlier. Though not essential for survival, education and healthcare complete the list.

**Physical wants:** Conversion of luxuries into essentials is the hallmark of economic progress. It has two facets: one, of new needs like two and four wheelers for transport, and comfort goods like air conditioners, furniture, and phones. The other, is for better-quality and exotic variety goods to cater to our quest for novelty. With technology, this list is growing endless at a rapid pace, visible in our mobiles.

**Psychological needs:** The sense that today and tomorrow will be as good as yesterday if not better is what most minds seek. This translates to a safe and secure environment, where an individual can pursue their interest without interference. In addition, adequate reserves to meet contingencies enhances our peace of mind, a basic psychological need.

**Psychological wants:** Psychological luxuries are the quest for adventure seen in pursuit of challenging physical or intellectual goals or chasing novelty to make life interesting. It often takes the form of participation in endurance

events like marathon or iron-man contests, or honing self-expression skills like dancing, singing writing, or painting or ticking off items in bucket list.

With limited time and resource, it is ideal to fulfil the needs first before pursuing wants? While there can be no compromise on the needs, regarding wants, is lesser the better for a superior quality life?



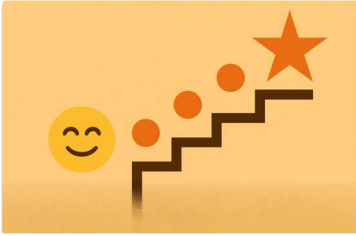
## 9. Ignoring the Price?

I am a budget conscious buyer who looks at the price tag more than once before buying. However, there are situations in which price recedes in my buying decisions. On reflection, I feel that I am not alone in this as I have seen even the shrewdest buyers ignore price in these seven situations. Can awareness can benefit us?

- i. **Low-cost convenience purchases:** Where the search cost for a better deal is high compared to the product cost, buyers are better off ignoring price. General stores located in residential areas leverage it. In today's world, quick-commerce services like Blink-it is built on this principle by providing home delivery.
- ii. **Wallet effect:** Where the consumer does not pay for it and it is paid from some other persons wallet, price is often ignored. Most visible in corporate executives travelling on expense accounts. With their purse insulated, executives often ignore the right side of the menu in their selection. This is also seen in insensitive guests wasting food at buffet tables.
- iii. **Gifting time:** Emotions override reason. Often while gifting, budget drives the purchase. Seen both in personal and corporate life, it is most prominent during wedding and birthdays for individuals and festive gifting occasions like Diwali and New Year for corporates.
- iv. **Quality impact:** Exceptional quality blinds, and with product quality the effect is no different. Also called the Rolls Royce effect, as we tend to fit products of superior quality in higher category. For Rolls Royce is displayed along with private jets, and not cars changing the reference price.
- v. **Switch cost:** an apt analogy for the tail wagging the dog. Many times, a lower priced asset can lead to buying higher priced consumable, ignoring more economic alternatives. Think of razor leading to expensive blade purchase, or a gifted blouse triggering a costly sari purchase.

- vi. **Relativity at Work** -Price paid for door mats and perfumes during a car purchase, or electrical and sanitary fittings during house construction make the buyer insensitive to price due to their relative smaller values. High price for one, makes the buyer insensitive pushing price out of reckoning. Also called the accessory effect.
- vii. **Holiday effect:** Ever made unnecessary and often paid higher prices while on a holiday? Welcome to the holiday effect, where our economic sense too goes on a vacation. The minute you touch down in your home town, your economic sense too lands as you get a tighter grip on your wallet.

While this knowledge may not make us shrewd buyers, a sincere hope is for some noticeable change.



## 10. Tell-tales of Learning

Long being envious of swimmers gliding through water, the last two years of my attempts to learn swimming has remained an attempt only. Given my early morning preoccupation with gym and TT, and my love

for long walks in the evening, finding time to swim is a challenge. Or is this lack of time due to absence of talent?

Analysing my swimming pool experience, I see swimmers at different stages of learning: novice learners like me, the accomplished artist, the enthusiastic and well-meaning teachers, and finally the silent pros.

Retaining this lens, not just in swimming but in other aspects of my life too, I could gradually spot the different stages of a learner's journey by analysing their Ask-to-Tell ratio. Were they asking more questions or were they telling me more of their experiences.

- i. **Low Ask-Low Tell:** A novice or early-stage learner is fully focused on observing and often has a low ask and low tell behaviour. Their entire energy is concentrated on seeing. Seeing and contemplating to internalise what they see and build their self-confidence.
- ii. **High Ask-High Tell:** As the early-stage learner starts to master one task after another, they often have a high tell for validating their experience and an equally high ask to get to their next goal faster. Their high chatter level is an indication of their desire to learn more, faster.
- iii. **Low Ask-High Tell:** In almost every field you find competent people with a desire to help the learners. Prompted by their love for the subject or the learner, they proactively share their experience and offer unsolicited suggestions. They even go out of their way to help learners acquire the skill. Leveraged dispassionately, they are a learner's best accelerator in mastering a skill.
- iv. **High Ask-Low Tell:** The champ, the master-pro, gliding through the water like a fish responds only when asked. And more often, their

response is a question as their answer. Their questions help you discover the answers yourself makes it memorable and internalised learning.

I realise that at a given point of time I am in the first three levels of learning in different spheres of my interest. This awareness and sensitivity should hopefully make me a better learner to someday move to the fourth level of mastery. By the next year, if I am an accomplished swimmer even at level two swimming multiple laps and enjoying it like my long walks, I believe I would have become a better learner that I am today. I hope writing this down is the first step to make it happen.



## 11. My Best Commercial Lesson

My best commercial lesson learnt is from the Roman philosopher Cicero's book *On Duties* written to educate his son on essentials for a happy life. Writing on ethics of commercial practices, Cicero narrates a debate between Greek philosophers, Diogenes the master and his pupil Antipater. Their debate centres on a sellers' duty that I find valid even after 2,000 years.

In the first instance, a grain merchant's ship is sailing to the famine affected island of Rhodes. The debate is whether the merchant in the first ship to reach the island should tell buyers that other ships are also on the way or keep quiet to get a higher price. In the second instance an owner of a wooden home, worried that it may be termite infected is debating whether he should confess this to the prospective buyer. In the third instance, a retiring Greek general looking to buy a villa for residence is lured into bidding an exorbitant price. The shrewd seller invites the General to the villa to dine and arranges for a few fishermen who pretend to fish in the adjoining lake and carry away bountiful catch for the general to see.

In the first instance of grain merchant, the debated issue: is silence deception? In the second instance of the wooden house: what is a sellers' duty? and in the third instance of the Greek general: is luring a potential buyer without uttering a lie a fraud?

Analysing the three situations, Cicero concludes

- i. The principle of **buyer beware** may be the norm of market place. But an ethical seller going beyond the market norms and sharing information that benefits the buyer creates goodwill and builds an enduring relationship.
- ii. To conclude a transaction, the seller can share more information by moving away from the buyer beware norm to a **contract of good faith**, to help the buyer to decide. In these contracts, the seller is responsible for what they say, and the buyer for their decision.

Prospectus issued by a company during IPO falls under this category holding the promoters legally liable for every statement made.

- iii. The third instance of luring a buyer with a false belief is a fraud despite not uttering a lie, as the intent is deceitful. It creates a third category of quasi-commercial transactions involving two parties with unequal information. Prominent deals in this category today involve professionals, i.e. individuals with superior knowledge like doctors, lawyers, and teachers, who are bound by an ethical code.

Professionals with superior knowledge make their clients role in decision making redundant. Hence the professional needs to decide keeping their clients' interest above their own. These are contracts bound by **professional ethics**, where the seller can unduly influence the buyer. Insider trading in stock markets is a current day example much closer to the Greek general's case. Insider trading in stock markets is banned as company "insiders" have undisclosed information.

The last few decades have seen increasing commercialisation of healthcare, education and justice systems. In my humble view, the moral health of a society is reflected in the prevailing market norms. More the buyer beware norm prevails, less healthy is the society.



## 12.The Work Puzzle

Work life occupies centre stage in our adult life. We are mainly known not only to others but also to ourselves by what we do. In our outlook on life, job satisfaction plays a key role. Reflecting on my four decades work experience, and people I saw who radiated job satisfaction, I found these five parameters play a key role.

- i. **Basic Interest** - Mark Twain said, 'Find a job you enjoy doing and you don't have to work a day.' For most of us it translates to first finding what we enjoy doing, and then finding a paying job for doing it. While professional sports and arts are its visible testimony, I have also seen most successful corporate executives "playing" at work. Work for them is what cricket and tennis is to Tendulkar and Federer.
- ii. **Personal growth** -Challenging work that require you to go beyond your existing skill set not only engages you totally but also provides enormous satisfaction on completion. As you grow professionally enriching yourself, external rewards that accompany it are like the dressings on cake, enhancing your satisfaction.
- iii. **Self-acceptance** -Ambition and ability needs to be in sync. Accepting our limitation is a key element to avoiding frustration. Often where ability limits the ambition, we see individuals identify themselves with an icon or a larger group, especially an organisation, team or community and see their dreams realised by contributing their might to the common cause.
- iv. **Autonomy** -Freedom empowers and gives a sense of purpose. As we spend more than half our waking time at work, it is logical that autonomy in work-life leads to not only job satisfaction but overall life satisfaction. Like in self-acceptance, autonomy is not just for the individual but for their team, function, or the organisation. Absence

of autonomy at any of these levels can impinge on the job satisfaction level.

- v. **Positive inter-personal relations** -Job satisfaction can never be seen in isolation of inter-personal relations at work. A safe, conducive and friendly workplace is essential, and its absence can erode the other four elements.

In the ideal world, all five elements need to align together. Luckily for us, even when three or more are aligned, we can have a satisfying work-life. The quest for the missing piece could keep us engaged and optimistic for the future.



### 13. Bigger, Frequent, Recent

Differentiating between a customer, consumer and client took me a while as they are often used interchangeably. I now clearly see that professionals like lawyers and doctors have clients they service,

consumables like eatables and cosmetics are sold to consumers, and “useables” like clothes and furniture purchased by customers. Other than owners and lenders, only customers, used in the broader sense to cover both consumers and clients, provide a business money. In contrast, all other stakeholders be it employees, vendors, or government, who demand to be paid for their services.

Of the three sources of finance, customers are the most desirable source, for only they can ensure a successful business. Given their prime value, it is only natural to give every customer the highest attention. As businesses grows and customers increase, it is natural though not desirable for businesses to prioritise some customers over others based on their perceived value.

“Bigger the Better” is one of the three criteria used to prioritise. Target driven sales team is often the first point of a customers’ interaction. This often translates to a bigger customer getting better prices, higher priority and more personalised service. This prioritisation is most visible in single purchase businesses like real estate, where the builders prioritise the interest of large apartment buyers. Even in single purchase businesses reputation is built by word-of-mouth publicity. Hence, prudent businesses focused on building sustainable profits go beyond “bigger the better” and look at the other two elements.

Frequency is the second element that builds size over a period of time. More frequent, much better, as even smaller purchases repeated frequently gets bigger like the daily purchase has a 365 multiplier in annual sales. With frequency, the prioritisation is now balanced by looking at purchase over a period of time; the shift is from considering one-time purchase to purchases

over a period. The period considered depends on the nature of business and the business leaders' outlook.

Recency is the third element for prioritisation. More recent the purchase, sharper the memory in strengthening the relationship and make the clients more valued. Further, recency of purchases is often a good predictor of a repeat purchase.

Considering all the three elements, the most valued customer for a business is the one who is the biggest, most frequent, and the most recent. If an effective tagline is required for business, especially the sales function, Olympics with its Faster, Higher, Stronger tagline communicating the essence of competition provides the inspiration. Does Bigger, Frequent & Recent meet the test as an effective tagline for the sales function in prioritising customers?



## 14. Creating An Ownership Culture

Ever wondered why the ownership spirit is not more widespread in organisations? Puzzled by the high ownership shown by relatively junior staff positions like the CEO's secretary or driver in contrast to the attitude of many senior managers? Financial benefits alone do not seem to create ownership. But what else does?

My four decades plus experience made me realise that ownership has two distinct elements, the rights and the responsibilities. On the rights front it is being acknowledged as owner and to

receive periodic income and on asset sales, the proceeds. In businesses, especially start-ups, ownership culture is sought to be created using ESOPs by creating these rights.

Sharing economic benefits is a great beginning but has a limited role. Further, sharing economic benefits is not possible in a social or political organisation, nor is it feasible in loss-making economic units. Here ownership can only be created using responsibilities. Counter intuitively, entrusting individuals with responsibilities creates a stronger sense of ownership, making individuals "own" their roles and their organisations, making the organisation successful. Even profitable entities combine both elements of rights and responsibilities in creating effective ownership culture.

I have seen three distinct elements contribute to creating ownership culture:

- A. **Confidant:** Trust is best demonstrated in access to confidential information. By exposing confidential information to an individual, implicit trust is demonstrated that goes far beyond what economic rights can create. Is it the Pygmalion effect of trust begetting trust?

- B. **Delegation:** A higher level of trust is in giving individual a decision makers role. Involvement can be at multiple levels. Presence in decisions making meetings, or being consulted, or the right to decide, or assigning execution responsibility. Each one plays a pivotal role in creating ownership. As etymology suggests, to create ownership, it must be owned; like artists own their creation, owners own what they create, be it a task or a decision and through it the organisation.
- C. **Partnership-spirit:** In many situations it may not be feasible to involve an individual in decision making or execution. Here creating the ownership spirit lies in how quickly and proactively the information is shared. Ownership culture is created when the partnership-spirit of “want to share” replaces the principle of “need to know” as the default communication mode.

Beneficial interest is the legal term for ownership rights, and ownership responsibilities are clubbed under fiduciary duties. The need to recognise this difference in ownership rights arose when the care of a property was entrusted to a non-owner, like guardians appointed to manage a minor’s assets, or in companies’ board of directors entrusted with decision making powers on behalf of shareholders.

In summary trust, delegation, and proactively communicate to creates ownership culture. Is your experience the same or any different?



## 15. Excellence as Practise -The EGO Principle

Messi's dribbling skills, Rishab Pant's hook shot, Michael Jackson's moon walk to name a few leaves me spell bound. Excellence in any field, be it sports, art or vocation, draws my admiration for it illustrates the best of human nature. I am a passionate student of methods to attain excellence, driven by my yet

unattained desire for personal excellence. This search led me to the E.G.O. principle for building a practise for attaining excellence. This principle is not just applicable to individuals but it applies equally for teams too.

Often EGO has a negative connotation associated with arrogance and selfish behaviour but in this instance, the acronym E.G.O. contains the ingredients to build a practise for excellence. The short journey of Practice to Practise, from the noun to the verb is travelled in the vehicle of E.G.O. E.G.O the acronym stands for Excellence, Goal-oriented and Organic. Practise for Excellence translates to intentional repetition of a set of interrelated acts with a focus on refinement to achieve Excellence, in a Goal-oriented activity, to make the practise Organic, i.e. a second nature of the individual or organisation.

**Excellence** has multiple ingredients and one of its essential inputs is to satisfy the inner needs of the individual or the team irrespective of external recognition or rewards associated with it. This urge for excellence is most visible in the standards of performance that the individual set for themselves. A distinguishing feature of the set standards is an intrinsic good that is valued its own sake.

**Goal orientation** i.e. a defined target is the second ingredient for excellence as practise. Initially it starts with a broader target area, and as the individual gain mastery, the focus narrows down to minute details of the task that often escapes the laypersons attention. Gradually as the mastery over one task is

achieved, the individual shifts their attention to other adjoining areas expanding their domain of excellence.

**Organic** is what embeds excellence in an individual and makes it their second nature. The true test for an organic habit is that it becomes a reflex action, that combines the three Is, Instinctive, Involuntary and Instantaneous response to the situation. This is more often visible in artists and athletics who perform complex manoeuvres leaving us spellbound.

Experts and experience tell us that we cannot just give up a bad habit. But a bad habit can be easily replaced with a good one. My endeavour is to replace the much-detested EGO with E.G.O. that is a must to pursue excellence. Make my play time, my perfection time.



## 16.The Base for Business 07 09 2025

Companies today dominate the business world and corporate honchos like Elon Musk and the AAs sit at the apex of our society's decision-making table. Their prominence gives them an influence that extends far beyond their business, and often they influence emerging social and political issues. Given this importance, a pertinent

question to ask is what makes a business successful?

I see businesses as a potent blend of passion, relationships, intellect, and resources. Start-ups that dominate our media today show how businesses grow from infancy to unicorns within a decade, providing us enough material for analysis.

**Spark**-While a company is the vehicle for business, promoters are their drivers, often an individual or a small team of individuals who kick-start the business. Passion is the spark that ignites start-ups. Promoters have a unique lens that shows them solutions where others only see problems. While this passion may not be always explicitly, the time they invested in honing the solution is a good barometer of the intensity of their desire.

**Flame**-if passion is the spark relationships are the flame for a business idea to bloom. Passion, like a magnet attracts people with similar interest to form the initial team. Reflected in strong well-knit team, it creates the fuel for persistence which is essential for succeed. A team with complementary skill-sets is required to achieve the business goals. The minimum required is three members: a Visionary who paints the goal for all to see, a Mobiliser who buys into the goal and gets the required resources, and an Executor who fuses the vision and resources into a vehicle that propels the business forward.

**Heat**-ignited by a spark the dancing flames must generate heat. Heat in business is the result of intellect at work. A passionate and persistent team fused with purpose is measured only by its output. While success in a mature business is measured by satisfied customers and profits, an adolescent business must create patents and demonstratable artifacts that attract investors who contribute resources to get the business off the ground.

**Fuel** -Businesses are like aircrafts needing runways to take-off. Runway for a business is the time required to turn profitable. Bigger businesses, like larger aircrafts need a longer runway and the length of the runway in business is determined by the money at its command. Once they take-off businesses generate their own fuel, and successful businesses fuel their owners too.

In summary, businesses are a potent blend of passion, relationships, intellect and resources. It is only in start-ups that we can distinctly see each of them come together to create a successful business. For anyone starting a business please pray for passion, relationships, intellect and resources in that sequence. I must confess, that I was extremely lucky to have found all the four in my short decade long entrepreneurial journey with CimplifyFive.



## 17. Start-up Experience Simplified

After a two-decades stint in a large corporate, followed by a decade in academics coupled with advising businesses as Director on their board or consultant, I turned entrepreneur with my new venture -CimplyFive. With a little more than passion in my kitty, I went through all the stages of romance, in my entrepreneurial journey. There was the exciting courtship,

followed by blissful honeymoon, leading to the advent of anxiously awaited but demanding customers. I exited the business handing it over to the new owners, with two of the five stages yet to materialise: of providing investors a periodic return, and ensuring that the society's resources are not wasted by seeing the business turns profitable.

I saw when and how each stakeholder engages with a new business and their primary concerns. Entrepreneurs by starting the venture realise half their dream. Seeing the idea materialise, they are elated at overcoming their apprehensions and taking the plunge. Birth of a venture is just the start, keeping the new venture afloat is the second part of their dream. Money is the oxygen for business, and a venture's ability to attract employees and vendors is based on their perception of the venture's ability to survive. While entrepreneur's passion can attract them, it is only money visible in assets like an impressive office and other artifacts like advertisements that creates the sustaining glue.

Of the three stakeholders who bring in money to the business, customers are the most demanding for they have the least patience. Customers not only bring in money but they also validate the business idea and vote with their cheques on a business's right to survive. With customer patronage, investors who trusted the promoters initially and wait patiently can be rewarded. Finally, though not a legally binding obligation, a successful venture that ensures resources are used gainfully is honoured by giving the business a louder voice that is heard in shaping the societies future.

In short, a business marks the attainment of different stakeholders' goals when it progressively reaches these milestones:

- On commencement, an entrepreneur's dream is realised,
- On continued survival, its vendors, lenders and employees' goals are met,
- As it grows, its customers' needs are satisfied,
- On turning profitable, its investors aim is reached, and
- A sustainable business, ensures that the society's resources are productively used.

Like romance in entrepreneurship too, courtship is exciting, honeymoon blissful, customers' needs challenging, investors patient but demanding, and the society overtime honouring.



## 18. IR to AI: What Can We Infer?

Will the 21<sup>st</sup> century's AI transform humanity as the 19<sup>th</sup> century IR did? Industrial Revolution increased productivity by about 50% in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and shifted the global economic centre from Asia -India & China to Europe - predominantly England.

IR transformed human life in three distinct ways: rapid urbanisation, capitalists replacing the feudal lords at the apex of society, and shortages induced scarcity mindset replaced by increasing insensitivity to the rapidly growing inequality, where surplus production and starving population coexists. The last four decades saw China and India start to regain their lost position with their population again playing a key role: China as the manufacturing hub and India as the global service centre for the world.

The rapid growth of AI in the last few years has the potential to transform human society once again. **What IR was to goods, AI can be to services.** Textiles that took days and weeks to make, or distances that took weeks and months to travel after IR could be done in days if not hours. Likewise, it looks like the work that takes weeks and months to learn or complete, can be done in hours if not days. Software coding, inbound calls for client support, designing of almost anything, translations, and learning new skills are only a few examples of many more that can be done.

Like IR, AI too will transform human life. I asked AI what positive impact it can have for us humans? Its response was both insightful and stunning, it depicted a compass pointing to wisdom, compassion, innovation, and justice as the four directions of its potential impact. Thoughtful and incessive decision making for wisdom, empathy and care infused into policy making, creativity with speed in innovative problem solving, and fairness and equity in providing timely justice.

AI can do all this and more for the human potential to bloom and transform this earth into heaven. But the moot question is, will human greed and lust for power let this happen, or will AI be forced to serve the elite and the powerful once again? What do you think?



## 19. Family: A Fading Idea?

I am fortunate to have the happy experience of living in a joint family for the first three decades of my life, a nuclear family for next three, and currently living with our lovely daughter-in-law and son. Given my enriching family-life experience, I am quite stunned to see the social challenge surrounding us: of 80+ aged seniors living alone, working couples stressfully juggling work and care for their young children, married couples evaluating the affordability of having a

baby, not unlike buying a consumer durable, or youth seriously evaluating the desirability of marriage. What has changed in the last fifty years that has made joint families in India give way to nuclear families, and now the recent trend of a growing number of individuals wanting to live alone?

Have economic and commercial considerations replaced filial and moral drivers in our society? Is this a reflection of Western values invading the Indian society? Will it be a matter of time before the American challenge of more than a quarter of families being a single-parent households, and 40% of the first marriages ending in divorce echo in Indian? I got some clue to answering these questions in a thought-provoking book by Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind, Why People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. This book answers much more of the current social challenges including why our societies are now virtually split along political and religious beliefs.

Unlike the popular belief, the author shows that there is no one set of ethics that is applicable to the entire human race. The ethical-belief systems change as we move from the western to the eastern hemisphere. At a broad level, the ethic of autonomy in the west shifts to the ethic of community and divinity in the east. He coins an interest acronym WEIRD for Western Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic societies where the ethic of autonomy prevails. Even in the eastern hemisphere, the WEIRD sections of the society are increasingly adopting the ethic of autonomy, just as the blue-collared, working class and the rural population in the Western societies retains much of the ethic of community and divinity.

The **ethic of autonomy** prioritises empowering the individual with freedom and right to self-expression. It encourages individuals to define their own paths—in career, relationships, or belief systems. The family too promotes responsibility and accountability in children with results measured using the economic lens of income

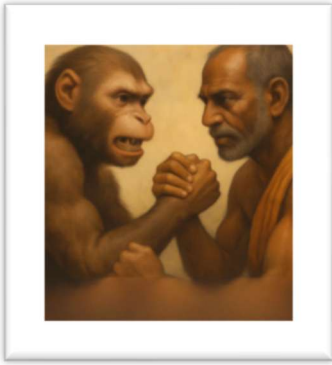
and wealth. An undesirable byproduct of this is fragmentation of relationships, where family becomes a loose-knit, need-driven association of individuals that come together when convenient and/or preplanned.

The **ethic of community**, by contrast emphasizes relationships and interdependence. It sees the family as an anchor where each member is a contributing member. The system is based on trust, ensuring care for elders, guiding children in their choices, and respecting social traditions. When community ethic is blindly enforced, it stifles personal growth, promotes injustice, especially for women and members seeking individuality by limiting their freedom.

The desirable code of ethic is neither of the two. While it is easy to prescribe the ideal ethical code, it is difficult to practice it. What is needed is a mindful blend of autonomy embedded in the ethic of community. Children growing up with a sense of autonomy that incorporates both empathy and respect for tradition as essential values. While at the same time realising without the economic means to survive, there is no life to enrich.

A sharp blade by itself, or a handle without a blade is impractical, and does not make a useful knife, Likewise, everything in this universe needs balance: autonomy for the individual in their prime, with filial care at the beginning and the end is what makes life integrated and meaningful.

Do you agree this blended ethics will solve the current challenges, or do you have a different take?



## 20.The APE I Wrestle

After-Sales experience is a well-known concept in the commercial world but in my personal life I have to confront an **APE, After Purchase Experience**. My problem is of a compulsive buyer unable to resist bargains. My two weaknesses: inexpensive clothes and often expensive books give me very different After Purchase Experience (APE).

After buying clothes, I feel stupid and have a sense of remorse which is rarely the case when I buy books. I wonder why. Is it because books are “durable” and hence not a waste, or is it because books can be used by more than one and hence not a personal indulgence, or is there something more to it. Could it be that with books my effort starts after the purchase, in reading it?

The APE bug latent in my mind was triggered and came to life when I was reading the works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher Alasdair Macintyre. Studying pursuit of excellence in professions, Macintyre differentiates between internal goods and external goods. He studied intense practice that is seen in individuals seeking mastery in their chosen profession. Arts, sports and professions involving skills are the most visible spheres. These practitioners undergo significant pain in realising their goals. Their primary aim in improvement, accomplishment and mastery of their skills is personal satisfaction or what we can call internal or intrinsic goods.

In contrast, purchase of goods like clothes, beyond the essential required for living is for meeting external or extrinsic needs. The unstated need is to look and feel better, or the desire to adorn ourselves to look better than we think we are. Here most of the effort is made prior to the purchase with very little afterwards.

On reflection, I feel remorse on purchase of goods like clothes comes from the little effort required after the purchase. While with books or musical instruments and the like, major effort is required afterwards. The

classification of goods is not a watertight division, as I can see movements both ways. Purchasing external goods for gifting or for value-add before use like painting or embroidery is rarely followed by a sense of guilt, likewise while we see professional athletes pursuing their sports as a career often turn to other sports for recreation, showing that commercialisation of internal goods can make it an external good.

I fervently wish that I win this wrestling match with my APE. My victory will be visible when I give up buying external goods, except when it is a necessity. Do you have similar APEs?



## 21.STOP -Steps to Overcome Powerful

We are all familiar with hierarchy and the sticks and carrot approach used to enforce order. However, in successful organisations there is an effective bottoms-up communication method that keeps the higher ranks in check and ensures the interest of the lower ranks is not ignored. It is interesting to see that the bottoms-up approach evolved very early in human history to

enable the objective of cooperative ventures to be realised. The acronym STOP, i.e. Steps To Overcome Powerful uses five techniques that prevails today as it did in human groups thousands of years ago.

**GOSSIP:** When higher ranks take the lower ranks for granted and disrespect them, the gossip whispers begin by ridiculing the offender. Today, access to audio-visual medium combined with internet for mass circulation has made mimes an effective weapon, by taking the voice of the oppressed heard wide and clear. You don't have to look beyond the '*pappu*' and '*fekhu*' jibes in India or the global Donald mime factory to realise how effective it is against even the most powerful today.

**CRITICISM:** When oppression continues, whispering gossips grow louder into frontal criticism. Initially heard in the periphery, it gradually moves centre-stage to confront the ruling elite. It requires courage to criticise the powerful, which is both a challenge and an opportunity. The one who seizes this opportunity and voices the opinion of the masses emerges a leader.

**DISOBEDIENCE:** When criticism fails to redress the situation, it calls for action. In the last century, disobedience as a public protest movement against the powerful was used twice effectively. First, in the Indian fight against British for Independence, and later in the 1960s by Dr. Martin Luther King as American Civil Rights Movement. Closer home sulking children can be seen using it by throwing tantrums to get their way.

**EXIT:** If all the earlier avenues of gossip, criticism, and disobedience fail the only option left is to exit the group and create a parallel group to co-exist with or challenge the ruling elite. This course is often met with hostility by the ruling elite who want it suppressed within or outside their organisation. In commercial organisations, exits are the most effective means of communicating dissent with the leadership.

**MURDER:** When even the exit route is blocked or is not viable, the last option of violence opens up. In the animal kingdom, the strong overpowers the weak and rules. The weak have no option but to bid their time and wait for the alpha male to age and overpower the weakened leader. But in human societies a major change occurred with the advent of weapons, spears and arrows at first, and later guns and rifles. Weapons gave the desperate members of oppressed group the means to overpower the strong. With spears, arrows, guns and rifles, they could attack the strong from a distance and had a better chance of success. Murder came with social sanctions and stringent punishment when caught and remains the last resort for the oppressed as seen in Nepal in the past week.

Not just in polity but in all other social and business organisations too, these means of protest thrive, though the last option of murder is rarely used. For the discerning leader, STOP is a good safety valve, showing them a mirror to correct and redeem themselves. But do they?



## 22.Of Spectators, Pros & Champs

When Roger Federer caresses a down-the-line forehand winner to wrong-foot his opponents, or Lionel Messi chips the ball over the hapless goalkeeper with poetic precision, or Virat Kohli threads a cover drive between the two fielders placed precisely to prevent it, we are witnessing not just the skill but a kind of effortless brilliance that defines the champion. Their actions seem to defy physics and human limits, for it is executed with such grace to make it look effortless. Mastery is not just about winning but is in making it instinctive and a reflex action: low effort -high result.

Spectators at the other end of the spectrum have a low level of involvement. The armchair critic scoffing at a missed shot or a failed pass, judges the effort with ease. But their low effort is accompanied by low reward. It is a judgment without effort — a low-effort, low-reward state that thrives on superfluous opinion and heated debates often lacking substance.

Between these two extremes lies the vast terrain occupied by amateurs and professionals. The amateur in contrast to the spectator, even when watching invests high effort. They do not merely observe; they imagine themselves playing that role, attempting to feel the touch in the stroke, the weight behind the chip, the timing of the stroke. Their sincere appreciation and desire to replicate leads to high effort but low result. Their low result is due to their inability to translate their desire into action. They are driven by wonder, curiosity, admiration, and the desire to grow in their quest for mastery.

The professional, by contrast, takes that same inspiration from champions and channels it into disciplined practice. They move beyond appreciation to execution, refining their craft with repetition, feedback, and perseverance. Their high effort is marked by high result as they are able to replicate the champions, on most occasions. They move beyond the amateur to their

professional state by embodying technical excellence, just a step short of the instinctive mastery of champions.

In this layered spectrum of human endeavour, each role reflects a different relationship between effort and reward. The spectator watches, the amateur aspires, the professional demonstrates, while only the champions live it.

Having lived through only the first two states in all my sixty-five years of existence, my aspiration for the later two stages remain undiminished. Not just in sports but in other spheres of life too!



## 23. My Spiritual Beliefs

I am not a religious person for I do not follow any rituals, daily or even on festive days. When accompanying my spouse to temples or other religious functions, I try and conform to the socially acceptable norms so as not to stand out like a sore thumb. Internally I keep myself engaged by observing to see what I can learn

from that experience. Despite this I believe that I am a spiritual person.

My fundamental beliefs on spirituality are in three key inter-related concepts. The Karma Theory that states we get only what we give, the Advaita concept that all living beings are one, and stemming from these two the idea that an individual's happiness is derived from the happiness of their group.

- i. **Karma Theory** — I hold a firm belief that our life reflects who we are. Our actions, intent, and choice shape our present and the future. Karma to me is a compass: positives like empathy, generosity, and integrity are returned to us, while selfishness and harm we inflict on others echoes back for sure, despite their unpredictable timing for certain.
- ii. **Advaita Concept** — I believe we are all connected at the core and at an abstract level we are all one. The differences we perceive are due to our lack of focus, reflecting an inability to connect with this core belief. True understanding lies in recognizing that our joys and sorrows are shared, and our distinctiveness is temporary and illusory. This belief is the true fountainhead for all compassion and empathy in this universe.
- iii. **Social Good shaping Individual Happiness** — I believe in a socio-centric view of the individual i.e. a person's happiness is inseparable from the well-being of others. When the society thrives, individuals flourish. When people around us suffer, our own peace of mind is threatened and becomes fragile. This idea guides my choices and values, reminding me that personal fulfillment is not a solitary pursuit but a shared journey.

In essence, my spirituality is quiet, reflective, and rooted in lived experience. It does not seek divine intervention or ceremonial affirmation. Rather, it seeks harmony — with nature, with others, and with the deeper truth that connect us all. If I do not practise these at all times, it reflects my weakness and is not a reflection of doubt in these core beliefs.



## 24. Confronting PEAKs in My Treks

As an average individual, I have sought to infuse excitement in my life by travelling new terrains. In my career spanning four decades, I have ventured out into the corporate, academic, and social sectors, in addition to trying my hand at writing, academics and entrepreneurship. Like a novice mountaineer, I had to evaluate my readiness to conquer each new peak. PEAK the acronym standing for Past performance, Experience for the task on hand, Ability to execute the selected task and Knowledge to handle the unforeseen future.

Using PEAKs was not unlike the 360<sup>0</sup>-appraisal I faced in 1990s in Wipro, where my supervisor, peers, team members and myself, appraised my performance. This being a personal venture, I had to self-evaluate from four different angles to ensure that I completed my 360<sup>0</sup>-appraisal of a different kind.

**Past** performance of my two decades corporate career gave me the confidence to try something new. Wanting to write, and a desire to emulate my student day heroes, my teachers was the trigger. All that I knew was my ability to apply diligently to a given task and put in the required hours, however long it may take to complete it. This gave me the confidence to embark on my adventure.

**Experience** is the bridge connecting the old with the new. I felt a bit more prepared for the teaching assignment, having been a faculty in corporate leadership training programs for a decade. Not taking this experience for granted, I spoke to a few experienced teachers to learn from them. Initially I feel that I overprepared for my classes and packed a lot more content that required. My later years were focused on limited content but more time spent to provide the context and illustrate it with examples.

My **ability** to write a book lacked any tangible evidence. But I believe I had the ability to learn. Like a curious child, I began to devour articles and books on writing. Set out to write book reviews to practice the new skill. A few kind and discerning readers critiqued it, provided valuable feedback and more important, practical suggestions to improve my writing and sustain my enthusiasm. With time, I think I am getting better.

**Knowledge** of the future that confront us is known only when we are on our journey. My experience as an entrepreneur taught me despite your best preparation, your plans can go off road. Further, it tests the strength of your motives, willingness to learn, and tolerance for inconveniences that come your way. Resilience is the main quality that you need in meeting unforeseen challenges.

In all my new adventures and in my role of evaluating candidates for jobs, I found PEAK a good model to use. **Performance** is the trail covered, **experience** is flexibility to adapt to new terrains, **ability** is the skill-set you have, and **knowledge** is the map to your summit. It is a holistic view that honours the past, empowering the present, even as it prepares for the future. How have you navigated your peaks?



## **25. Morality-An Eastern View**

Going through literature on Indian philosophy I came across an interesting concept that has struck to my mind where morality is viewed through the lens of hunger. Hunger is bisected into its two ingredients, of being an individual's need, and requiring immediate satisfaction. These two elements give rise to a potential abuse where hunger is fed ignoring the ecosystem, and the individual's future needs. This abuse of acting on selfish desire is seen as an evil to be guarded against for the benefit of both the individual and the ecosystem.

Morality in this context is an answer to curb this evil of selfish conduct. Hence, the need for morality arises where ever there is hunger i.e. motive for selfish behaviour. It is quite logical to consider an expand definition of hunger that goes beyond the need for food to the need for wealth, power and pleasure in viewing a comprehensive moral code. The corollary is also true, where there is no hunger, there is no need for selfish conduct and hence a moral code to curb the evil is superfluous.

How is this moral code to be internalised by humans? To this question, Indian philosophy has an interesting answer. It views humans as composed of five layers—the physical, vital, mental, intellectual and blissful. There is no role for the physical or vital layer in either learning or acting on a moral code. Moral education that is first imparted to the children, is through the mind by habit, using the carrot and stick approach, i.e. externally induced. At this stage the individual does not consciously adopt the moral code but can be well trained in it.

Moral conduct as a discretionary, consciously accepted code of conduct is seen when the intellect comes into play. Here the individual consciously and voluntarily decides to act morally, i.e. restraining their self-interest. Hence any adult capable of conscious independent decision making, which includes children with this discernment, can be given the freedom to act and be held

accountable for their moral behaviour. This state then can truly be called ethical, as morals are internalised and it arises from within.

There is a third stage beyond the intellect, that the Upanishads guide to, where the individual self merges with the universal ecosystem. At this stage, morality becomes superfluous, as there is no selfish instinct to be curbed as the concept of self itself is dissolved in the ecosystem.

Given this context, three degrees of hunger are recognized– *mita*, *rita*, and *hita*.

- *Mita* or measured: Hunger that acknowledges the need but resists excess. Here hunger is measured, mindful and restrained.
- *Rita* or cosmic order: This hunger is in sync with the ecosystem. Here hunger is conscious of the ecological balance, social needs and seasonal variations. Individual needs are met with the least impact on the ecosystem and future needs.
- *Hita* or beneficial: Hunger used as a means to serve the ecosystem. Here consumption is transformed into contribution. It seeks satisfaction while uplifting others' emotional, social and ecological needs by for example sharing, supporting local producers and being ecologically sensitive in consumption.

Theodore Veblen in his 1899 classic 'The Theory of the Leisure Class' identified the concept of conspicuous consumption, as a disease afflicting the industrial economies resulting in unequal societies. Does Indian philosophy offer a cure for this? Do you think this idea is relevant today?



## 26. Solving Limited Means, Unlimited Wants Challenge

Who is unaware of Bangalore traffic-jams and its growing challenges? I can relate to it with my personal experience of the heavy traffic of needs, wants and desires

flooding the narrow roads of my economic means. If Bangalore's serene weather is to be blamed for the huge population influx, I can blame technology for inciting my innocent mind with raging desires.

Can the different types of properties available to satisfy my personal need provide a solution to the Bengaluru's traffic woes? Or rather, given the social challenge of the city's commute that is engaging the most brilliant human minds be my learning ground to decongest my personal lanes? Personal property, private property, public property and shared property are the four distinct categories that can solve not just the two problems identified but almost all economic challenges.

Before the metro and even before the four and two wheelers boom, there was the foot. With Shoes, **personal property** that only one individual can use, come the simplest, cheapest, and healthiest commute mode. Walking isn't just transport; it's a rebellion against gridlocks. Imagine if every Bengalurean walked a few Kilo-meters more each day; traffic would thin, waistlines shrink, and could shoe-makers outsell car-makers?

Of course, walking in Bengaluru requires courage. Dodging potholes, navigating footpath often substituting as the two-wheeler lanes, and escaping the occasional stray dogs is no small feat. But hey, every step is a victory in moving faster.

The mighty car and the nimble two-wheelers represent **private property** that can not only be used by its owners but can also be lent, rented or sold unlike our humble shoes the personal property. Offering freedom, a semblance of speed and the illusion of control they often contribute to the very congestion they seek to avoid. Private property tests our narrow roads just as it tests our

limited resources, as owning them is like owning the proverbial white elephant—majestic, yet sucking more time and resources to purchase, maintain, and operate them.

What if you can get the comfort of air-conditioning and speed of vehicles without the hassle of the white elephant? Welcome to **public property**, that is socially owned and used by the public. BMTTC buses and Namma Metro show us the comfort we can enjoy if only we can share our resources and not hoard it. Public properties are affordable, accessible and scalable, scoring a AAA rating. Here I am talking not just of public transport, for we only need to look at parks, lakes, and other public spaces where our joys multiply even as the care for it is divided. Public investment is not tactical but a strategic shift for it provides significant economic, social and environmental benefits.

Given the current state of governance and our limited ability to influence public investment, there is the middle ground between private and public property, the **shared property also called club assets**. Car pools, share-auto, swimming pools & club houses in gated communities represent shared ownership with restricted access. They are “limited public” properties created by and for select social groups that enable effective governance. They combine the best of both worlds, fusing private ownership with shared costs.

The trick to solve any problem is to look at options as complementary and not competing. Be it the city traffic or personal desires, choose an orchestra to hear the melody, where all instruments play.



## 27. Degrees of Poverty

As a socialist at heart, the issue of poverty often engages me for I believe our birth is a lottery and in a different world our positions could be reversed. The plight of helpless, deprived poor children is most often the trigger but etched in my memory is also a phrase from my readings decades ago, 'pursuit of poverty' where monks voluntary give-up comforts to live on the bare essentials.

Desiring to live in a more equal world, I have often explored this topic. I was quite surprised to discover clearly demarked degrees of poverty—penury, destitute, relative poverty and voluntary poverty. I believe a better understanding of these nuances is a prerequisite to eradicating it, for an equal society is a crime-free, if not a less-crime safer society.

**Penury** is the extreme poverty, where almost every type of need is unmet, be it food, clothing or shelter. As the bottom rung in the poverty ladder, even a full stomach once a day is a luxury that is threatening life itself. I believe a society where penury prevails cannot be termed a civilised society. If providing first aid to accident victims is a social duty, a society cannot be termed civil, if it does not eliminate penury.

**Destitute** is penury's slightly better-off cousin. They lack something essential which is required for a dignified living. Often it is home. Being homeless, they lack an identity and an address that can give them the access to basic civil services available to other members of the society. If penury is life threatened, destitution makes their lives invisible.

In contrast to the absolute state of penury and destitution, **poverty** is a relative measure. Even with a roof over the head, adequate food and

clothing, poverty exists. Lack of comfort and luxuries is the bane of the poor. Here it is not consumption quantity but the quality and variety consumed that divides a society into rich and poor. Some difference is acceptable or even desirable in society for it spurs individual effort. But in extremes it can corrode social values and promotes crime, both the white-collared frauds and the more violent crimes.

In this world of choice, **voluntary poverty** is chosen. Think of monks, ascetics, and that minimalistic friend who opted out of the rat race to a world where less is more. They do not need social status or recognition to signal their worth. They often hold a mirror to remind us of thoughtless consumption.

I believe reducing poverty requires both personal and social efforts. Providing free food grains and subsidised food that the government of India does today to about 80 crore Indian address reducing penury, and the support for home building can resolve homelessness. But for fighting all the three shades of poverty on a sustained basis, quality education to children and universal health care is essential.

Good quality education is required to motivate children when they grow up to move ahead on the road away from poverty; education that helps children think and become aware of their own role in shaping their future. For this good quality physical infrastructure alone is not enough. I believe well-paid, enthusiastic, and passionate teachers are the need, if going beyond survival and realising your potential is not just a winners' prize in the lottery by birth.



## 27. Battle of Bulges

Looks like the struggle to control waistline is not a unique challenge anymore. Along with wealth, waistlines too are growing, and inequality of wealth is literally visible in its twin counterpart, the rapidly growing obesity challenge. In the last decade,

global population of obese individuals outstripped the mal-nutritioned, raising serious questions about human sensitivities and sensibilities where one section is challenged to limit their food intake, even as the other section struggles to find enough food to survive.

The World Obesity Atlas 2025 projects there will be 1.13 billion obese people by 2030, a growth of 115% from 2010. In contrast, the number of 673 billion mouths facing hunger have only marginally declined globally, even as its number grows in poorer parts. If diabetes and heart disease are the bane of the obese, stunting, wasting, and anaemia are the faces of the malnourished. Sedentary lifestyles and fast food contribute to one, as abject poverty and life in conflict zones account for the other.

There is adequate mind share and growing resources allocated to managing obesity, whereas the more pressing but easier challenge to solve requiring only resource allocation to eliminate malnutrition remains unaddressed. I often wonder what is wasting and stunting, and how can it be eliminated?

**Wasting** is the most visible and acute form of nutritional deprivation placing human life in danger. The body rapidly loses weight, NOT due to choice but despite it, due to insufficient caloric intake. Seen mainly in children and the aged and in areas of humanitarian crises like war zones, relief camps and slums, it severely reduces their chance of survival. Therapeutic feeding programs and emergency food aid are the much-needed answers.

**Stunting** is the challenge of having enough calories to survive but not enough to grow especially in children. Measured against the norm of desired height

to age ratio, it chokes the latent human potential and destroys options available to them to participate in life.

India or for that matter, our global progress should be measured in not just how fast our economies grow and how many billionaires we create but in the speed with which we eliminate wasting and stunting as the first step in reducing inequality. AI, my new messiah for knowledge, estimates it will take only \$7-10 billion annually to eliminate both. In the current era of travel for recreation, especially space travel, is this amount too much to ask?



## 27. **Pancha Rina**

Maybe because I am an accountant by training that I appreciate the concept of *rina*, the Sanskrit word for debt or obligation. No asset can be created without liability, as even the capital contributed by the owners is a residual debt. In contrast to lenders who have a fixed claim for their loans and interest, owners get the residue. If

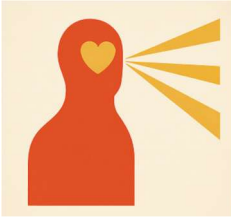
successful, they get higher than their contribution, and lesser or even lose everything if otherwise.

Given this understanding, it is natural for me to appreciate that born in this world we would also have debts to be discharged. The concept of *pancha-rina*, or five debts captures the essence of what a human is expected by the Sanatana Dharma to do in their life time. The five debts capture different facets of life making it comprehensive.

1. **Deva-rina** or debt to the creator is the first debt. This in essence means being respectful of all living beings and treating them with fairness that we would expect if our positions were reversed.
2. **Pitru-rina** or debt to ancestors. This is based on the belief that we as individuals are only a chain in the link between our ancestors and our descendants. Our debt is discharged when we have off-springs and make our off-springs aware of their *pancha-rinas*.
3. **Guru-rina** or debt to our teachers. Guru is made up of two syllables, *gu* meaning darkness and *ru* meaning destroyer. A guru is destroyer of darkness or ignorance by leading us to knowledge. Our debt to our guru is to preserve the knowledge we have learnt and where possible, add to the sea of knowledge.
4. **Nara-rina** or debt to our fellow citizens. We live in society and our basic duty is to respect the rights of others to live and follow socially accepted, ethical norms to ensure we do not infringe on the right of others to live.

5. ***Bhuta-rina*** or debt to our environment. We live as a part of the universal eco-system and we have a debt to care for our environment. The least we can do is to minimise our impact on nature and the next step is to help conserve and regenerate the nature for next generations.

Reflecting on the *pancha-rina* concept, I see a broader framework for individuals to consider while drafting their own personal Constitution. Further none of these are absolute prescriptions. Rather they are directional and only define a starting point which is our birth, and a direction to head towards. How far we travel is left to each one of us to decide and pursue.



## **28. AI, our Friend, Philosopher & Guide?**

I think the phrase friend, philosopher and guide, is used very liberally without much thought. I for one can only count a handful as such. Hence before I use it, I want to be doubly careful and ensure that it passes certain filters before applying it to my current obsession AI. Can

AI be our friend, philosopher and guide? To answer, I take a two-step approach of first defining them and checking if AI fits the bill.

A friend to me is one who meets the four criteria: who knows you, has your best interest at heart, is available when required, and speaks his mind. Evaluating AI on these four parameters, it passes three of these by a clear margin, the only issue on which I have a doubt is -does AI have your best interest at heart? I wonder why will tech-majors, the self-serving commercial giants, provide it to you free of cost? But if we can control our consumer appetite, can we negate this?

AI as a philosopher is a much easier question to answer. Philosophers are lovers of wisdom and have the capability for higher order thinking reflected in comprehensive analysis, dispassionate evaluation and objective synthesis. On all the three counts, AI scores, for it accesses all digitized content on the internet and can provide answers of varying length and depth as desired.

A good guide is knowledgeable about the terrain we want to cover and is aware of the seeker's capability and constraints. Of the two criteria, AI scores on the knowledge front for it is generic and accessing all the knowledge on the internet. When it comes to seeker's capability and capacity, I believe AI is only as good as the what the seeker demands. Here the quality of questions or prompts as it is called in AI is the key. It is up to the seeker to calibrate the level at which they need guidance.

Being positively disposed to AI I have ticked most of the boxes for it to qualify as a Friend, Philosopher and Guide. For the few gaps that exist, I believe both AI and the individual can grow to fill and complete it. Do you think I am on the right path or being foolishly optimistic?



## 29.The 3 Hs-Head, Heart & Hands

Watching TV news or reading the newspaper is my most distressing personal experience. The flood of hatred, cruelty, and violence flows unabated. Voice of sanity is loudly silent. I see many Dr. Jekylls turn into a Hyde at the very mention of religion, or the name of certain political leaders. This occurrence is

not limited to India. In fact, it is a global phenomenon with the US leading the way.

What makes very kind, logical and sensitive people turn into blood thirsty hounds? Is human mind so fickle that a few miscreants can play havoc with it? If we want to reverse this trend, what can we do? I know the task is challenging even for the intellectual giants attempting it. But as they say, when the desire is strong, even the weak start exploring the how. Hence, my humble attempt at initiating the reversal.

I believe the first step we need to take is to identify and build on common grounds. Is sustained happiness not the universal goal for all human beings? Can this be the bedrock on which we start our rebuild. This foundation of our common goals needs to find a place in every thought, conversation and media coverage. Let us stop looking for differences, for it is easy to amplify any difference. Instead let us find common grounds everywhere; use sports, arts, music and our common existential challenge of fight against poverty and disease unite us.

Exploring the past attempts at building bridges across faiths and belief systems, I came across the concept of 3 Hs of Hearts, Heads and Hands used to bridge social divides. By finding common anxieties and elations to anchor unity, we can use our common identity as human beings to cement our relationships, and jointly execute the common plans prepared together to solve this existential threat. We can use the:

- **Hearts:** Spark this revival by getting our hearts together to find common grounds,
- **Heads:** Convert this spark into a flame by getting our heads together and engage in finding initiatives to build on the common grounds and appreciate the differences,
- **Hands:** Fuel the flame by combining our hands together to execute the plans our hearts have ignited and our heads have fanned into flames.

While our approaches can be different, there must be no doubting the integrity of the common purpose that different groups have for this effort to succeed. Hence, we only need a pivot for this lever to turn the tide. Do you agree with this simple prescription? Can each one of us be the change that we want to see and focus on identifying our common ground to amplify it?



### 30. Ideas I Admire

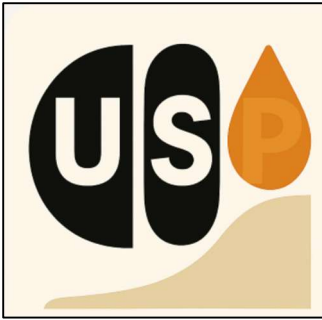
The most obvious truth I see is that all human efforts are for attaining sustained happiness. While this pursuit has taken multiple forms, one of the earliest conscious attempts by our ancestors for achieving enduring happiness is in religious ideas. Each of the major religion has given us valuable ideas in this pursuit.

I believe my lack of comprehensive knowledge of religions should not be an excuse for me to not express what I like in each one of them. I can start by listing out what I find the most appealing in each of them. While this identification is not the culmination of my thinking, it definitely is the start for me to evolve as I go along.

- a) The KARMA concept of 'you get what you give', with the timeline for this exchange being elastic and unpredictable, even spilling across lifetime is what appeals to me from the Sanatana Dharma.
- b) TZEDEK a Hebrew word encompassing the concept of justice, righteousness, fairness and integrity that believers of Judaism should follow. I see quite a bit of similarity between the word Dharma and Tzedek.
- c) The Christian idea of COMPASSION reflected in 'love thy neighbour' is an idea not just easy to understand but also clear to practice.
- d) The concept of *RIBA* or unjust increase in wealth is what I find endearing in Islam. To earn your livelihood each and every day and not live an idle life off your past earnings, is embedded in the idea of not taking interest on loans. It promotes equality and prevents exploitation of the poor.
- e) The idea in Sikhism of *VAND CHAAKO* i.e. sharing wealth and resources with the needy reflected in the concept of *Langar* where everyone is fed a simple meal without any discrimination is simply an outstanding demonstration of universal love.

- f) The idea that desires are the ROOT OF OUR SORROW and we need to reign them in is brought home by Buddhism highlighting the deep impact of our desires.
- g) NON-VIOLENCE, the intent not to harm even the tiniest micro-organisms practiced by the followers of Jain faith is I find commendable.

I think if we study all religions, we will find all the seven ideals listed above in each one of them. Can objective comparative study and constructive inter-faith dialogues be the vehicle to promote harmony in our society? Can we devote say one day a week, every week of the year to pursue harmony in our society by shunning all differences and celebrating our common cherished values? I believe with time, a day a week could become every day of the week. Any day is a good day to start; shall we start today....



### 31. Unique Selling Propositions

Until a couple of centuries ago, entrepreneurs had a relatively easy time in estimating market demand. Human needs were basic, consisting mainly of goods required for survival. Shortages were the norm. Only a handful, the royalty and the rich aristocrats needed luxury goods that was handcrafted.

The advent of industrial revolution with its mass production changed the equation once and for all. With buying power now in the hands of a significant portion of population, demand for goods changed from essentials to comfort goods and luxuries; even for essentials, the demand changed from quantity to quality and variety. This large demand triggered a flood of entrepreneurs to serve the growing customer needs. Entrepreneurs now need a unique selling proposition (USP) to make them stand out and attract customers to be viable.

The digital, online world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has shrunk days, weeks, months and years of the business world into seconds, minutes, hours, and days. Profitable businesses assured of survival for decades crumble in months now in the absence of an USP to keep them viable. Despite this change, there are only four sources of USP for a business -Novelty, Efficiency, Lock-in and Complementries. What was subtle earlier is now obvious: be unique or become obsolete.

- i. **Novelty** that came with exotic foreign goods or intricate artwork has now added technology to its domain to unearth latent needs or triggering new desires. Once triggered, it is no longer a novelty and becomes the norm. You don't have to look beyond your mobile phone to see this.
- ii. **Efficiency** is all about faster, bigger, and cheaper. What was hand crafted by artisans is now mass produced. The earlier USP of unique skillsets is now replaced by automated factory outputs of not just for goods but even services. Lower cost has made products affordable to a large section of our society, making this the most significant and enduring USP.

- iii. **Complementaries** the advent of computers drove home the value of complementaries and made people realise what was latent earlier. Just as software applications enhanced the value of a computer, likewise many products have created their own ecosystem. A profane example is shaving brush, shaving cream, razor, blades and after-shave lotion. They multiply utility, reinforce the need and become enduring.
- iv. **Lock-in:** or lure in is a better word, for it is not coercion but comfort that keeps the consumer locked-in. Customer trust is a critical element in the buying process; once a buyer starts to trust, the seller has to only expand their product range to keep the customer locked in. The recent expansions to cater to most of the customer needs by major industrial groups in India like Reliance, Tatas and Aditya Biral Group to name a few, is an example. What was latent is now reinforced with loyalty point discount schemes like the Tata's NeuCoins.

New businesses emerge with high novelty value to make their mark, as they mature they standardise to bring in efficiency, with an enduring customer need they look to create an eco-system by adding complementaries, and finally to dominate markets, they create customer lock-in by cornering resources and gain mind-share of the customer.

A strong and growing business will rest not on just one leg. It will leverage more than one, and all the four if possible. For novelty draws users in, efficiency keeps them coming back, complementaries deepen the relationship, and lock-in ensures that they can check-out but never leave.



### 32.The Secret Sauce of Success

Motivation is a common ingredient to success in all human endeavour, be it sports, arts, education or business. A motivated individual or team succeeds despite their adverse starting odds or the stiff challenges they face enroute. In fact, motivation often overpowers natural talent or the head start that life provides a privileged few as it powers them to the victory.

Motivation stands firm on a stable tripod, its three legs: **money**, **purpose**, and **autonomy**. Remove any one of the three, and it wobbles. Understanding this triad is

essential to nourish engagement, creativity, and sustained performance.

Further in the long run, interrelationship between these three elements can strengthen or weaken motivation.

The relative importance of the three can be seen where each of the element is essential and cannot exist in its absence, and where it plays a secondary role:

- Without **money**, the world of employment is void. This is best amplified by workers laying down their tools to seek higher wages. But in the world of art, sport, hobby and education, money plays only a supporting though an enabling role. Grants, prize money, and scholarships are not only hallmarks of excellence in their chosen field but significant validation of inherent talent which strengthen their motivation to fuel greater success.
- **Purpose** makes education, especially secondary education meaningful. Purpose transforms learning into a quest. Students engage to make a real-world impact—resolve challenges, ease lives and designing solutions. They move from mechanical memorizing to meaningful-metamorphosis. Absence or more often dilution of purpose leads to robotic engagement,

with hands and legs engaged but a missing heart that keeps their contribution to the minimum.

- **Autonomy** leads in the world of art, sports and hobbies, for it provides freedom, the freedom to fail. Autonomy fused with purpose can make art inspirational, and hobbies vocational. Here money is an enabler, for it buys both the time and tools required for the pursuit.

Motivation is no longer a mystery for it has become a design challenge. The tripod works best in employment when the money is fair, purpose clear, and autonomy real; in education: where money supports, purpose guides, and autonomy fulfils, and in art & sport: when money enables, purpose leads and autonomy liberate.

The idealist in me, dreams of a utopian world where education, work and art are fused into one giant engagement. Everyone lives a fully motivated life, engaging with purpose, and are free to choose what they engage in, as they earn enough money doing it. Can the growing retired community show the way though their lived life?



### 33.Settling Differences

Conflicts are a pivotal movement for they offer both a challenge and an opportunity. It can rewrite an individual's life narrative, or define a turning point in the history of an institution. The ideal way is to seize the opportunity and resolve it, be it the US tariff challenge or a person laid-off. Despite its importance, conflict resolution is not adequately discussed or

taught despite history providing a lot of lessons.

Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu approached the post-apartheid era in South Africa to resolve the emotive and explosive conflict in a unique way providing us both inspirational and insightful lessons. They changed from seeking retributive justice of an “eye for an eye”, to restorative justice, of working together to shape a combined future. It had the traditional four steps used in conflict resolution but with an interesting twist:

**Stage I: Conflicting Idea:** The root of most conflicts is in contrasting narratives. Opposing parties hold divergent visions of what is right, valuable, or feasible. Each believe that they alone are right. During apartheid, the white ruling regime saw control as stability, while the oppressed black saw liberation as justice. They met at Mont Fleur and began with an agreement to identify their differences.

The first step to resolution is not to forge an agreement but to recognise and acknowledge the differences. They identified four scenarios—**Ostrich:** of ignoring the main difference and hoping it will fade away, of **Lame Duck:** to accept their inability to solve the problem and work around it, **Icarus:** of overconfidence in solving the issue, named after the Greek myth of a bird with wax wings that melted when it flew too close to Sun, and the **Flight of the Flamingos:** to describe collective action seen in unity and celebration.

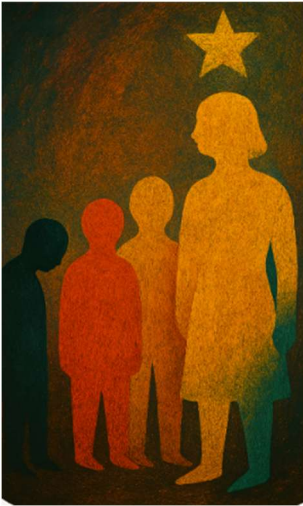
Like the iconic African heroes showed, all conflicts have all the four options. But the first step in resolving the conflict is to identify the source of the difference.

**Stage II: Conflicting Actions:** Ideas become actions. Hence, the focus is on the nature of ideas that are encouraged. If differences are the focus, protests, boycotts, and violence emerge. But if agreements are encouraged, it fosters dialogue, discussion and understanding which form the base for conflict resolution. The need for action is high, hence channelise it to collaborate, not contest.

**Stage III: Exploratory Interactions:** Here the search for shared purpose begins. This is the pivot. The focus here is to listen and learn, not preach and convert. The focus is on exploring each other's motives, fears, and hopes. Diverse insights help, hence involve a wider group of stakeholders. Blending desires of both the groups and addressing their fears is the way out. It means looking for win-win solutions. This is what the Flight of Flamingos communicate, of shared vision and plan for collaborative action.

**Stage IV: Collaborative Actions:** Finally, conflict evolves into co-creation. New initiatives, collaborations, and actions emerge, cementing fractured relationships. Autonomy is respected, while purpose and resources are shared equitably. Restorative justice is in play as the truth is told, and wounds are acknowledged to heal not avenge, and restore dignity.

These four stages are not linear progression but often involve back and forth movement. When the conflict is resolved, we do not see negative peace in the absence of conflict but a positive peace in active. If deep wounds of multi-decade problems like apartheid can be healed, can we not resolve all our differences amicably?



### 34. Followers Classified 28 09 2025

A successful team is one in which members complement each other to complete the qualities required for achieving the team goal. Not just in skill sets but even in the two critical parameters of the level of engagement, and taking a critical view the team needs to have diversity. This translates to four distinct groups of followers that help a team captain on the journey to success.

**Star-followers** catch the eye. They are active and critical. Participate in all the team events in all the three stages of planning, execution and post-mortem analysis. They have all the qualities for a potential leader but have a willingness to serve the current leader. The quality that distinguishes them is the ability to be critical of their leader's action in private but in public they will always support their leader. You may term them vice-captains. Most teams cannot accommodate more than a couple of star-followers. As their numbers increase there is conflict if the team cannot accommodate all their aspirations leading to some of them exiting the group.

**Yes-men** are followers who are active but always have a favourable view of the leader and the team both in private and public. Despite their negative image, often being labelled lackeys, they are the true strength of the team. Contrary to the star-followers, more the number of yes-men the better for the team, as they enhance team effectiveness.

**Sheepish** followers are both passive and always have a favourable view. In most public teams, especially political or social, they constitute the largest section of the team. Their contribution to the brand and reach of the team creates a positive image and a conducive environment for the team to achieve their goal.

**Alienated** followers are passive but critical of almost everything that the team does but not the leader. They are often the star-followers, who have switched

off their active role due to being disillusioned by the lack of appreciation from their leader and or not being given a defined role to contribute. They are valuable for the team, as they play a devil's advocate within the team, and in crisis they can be converted into a star-follower by the leader acknowledging their value and engaging them by entrusting specific responsibilities. This switches their passive mode to active as they move into star-followers category.

In all the teams around us, we can easily identify the four types of followers by seeing their participation, and hearing their views. Often what distinguishes a successful team is the right balance between the four types of followers. Further, success also creates a virtuous or vicious circle by strengthen or weaking the team composition by altering it. Successful leaders and enlightened members realise the role of all the four categories and leverage them to realise the team goals.



### 35. Altruism-What Triggers?

CSR was mandated by the Companies Act, 2013 in India requiring companies to spend 2% of their profits on social needs of the society. This raises the question, can altruism be legislated or is altruism defined to mean intentional, selfless action to benefit others only an oxymoron? A well packaged form of reciprocal exchange, or enlightened self-interest? On reflection, the triggers for altruism are quite a few and I can think of at least five triggers other than a legislative mandate like CSR for Indian corporates.

**RELIGION:** The oldest and probably the widest spread trigger for altruism across the world is religious duty. All religions without exception prescribe altruistic acts as a religious duty. Called by different name, **dana** in Sanatana Dharma, Buddhism, Jainism, **zakat** in Islam, **tithing** in Christianity, **Tzedakah** in Judaism and **Vand Chhako** in Sikhism to name a few. The only difference is in its frequency and the occasion. In some it is daily, in others annual or on the occurrence of specific events like death, birth or on festival days.

**PEER PRESSURE:** The peer pressure to conform is another widespread trigger. In many cases it not only triggers altruistic acts but also determines its magnitude. This peer pressure is felt more often in residential colonies, professional groups and business districts. Non participation can lead to loss of reputation and social status in society. This feature comes to the forefront in contribution to events of natural disasters like tsunami, cyclones and earthquakes.

**SELF-INTEREST:** Many acts of self-interest is often disguised or viewed as altruistic acts. Prime examples of these are businesses setting up hospitals, educational institutions or centres of art to mainly cater to their employees, or habitations disrupted by their business operations.

**PRIDE:** Human pride is a prominent trigger for many actions and altruism is no exception. This is often visible in fund raising events for charity organisations that use auctions of art items and sponsorship of music, and theatre as a platform for their wealthy patrons to showcase their generosity.

**SENSITIVITY:** Last but not the least, I believe altruism does exist for it is the emotional trigger activated by seeing other human beings suffer that makes us human. Even where the obvious trigger is one of the four listed above, the trigger for that trigger is human sensitivity or the emotional connect among human beings.

While the motive for altruism can vary and its presence in its true spirit debated, there is no doubt that the need for more altruistic acts is the desperate need in our society. As long as poverty and wide wealth disparity exists, and young children, aged adults, and the critical sick struggle to fend for themselves, altruism is the way to go.



### 36. Approach to Problem Solving

Problems are common occurrence in our daily life. They appear as hurdles to our daily routine or for the more enterprising, the challenge of find a new path that they have not traversed before. In fact, along with respiration, problems are what defines our life and makes us feel alive. Despite the varying nature of problem, be it personal, social, economic, or work related, problem solving has a common framework of four Ws and one H of why, when, where, whom and how.

**Why:** answering why is not only the starting point but often deceptively misleading if we do not go deep enough to address the actual trigger. The concept of 5-Whys used by management professionals to solve business problems helps in other spheres too. The idea inherent in 5-Whys is to think deeper, and peel it like an onion to find its core. Often the issue could be very different to what is initially seen, as it can uncover emotional undercurrents—resentment, miscommunication, and unmet expectations that helps us resolve the problem.

**When:** reveals the timing. Does it occur periodically or is it episodic. Recognizing *when* the problem surfaces help in getting a better idea of the why, that assists in pre-empting it. The five steps are not isolated or sequential but often involves back and forth movement. Bigger the challenge, higher is back and forth movement to solve it.

**Where:** helps in identifying the settings in which the problems arise and provides the context. By defining the settings, it helps identify all the parties involved in the situation to understand the role that each one of them can play in resolving it.

**Whom:** Whom does the problem effect? Beyond the immediate parties affected, it is good to identify the ripple effects it causes to help quantify the magnitude of the problem and prioritise its solution. By expanding the circle of impact, it can harness all the impacted parties in resolving the problem effectively.

**How:** this is where thinking meets action. Should it be a reflection, discussion, dialogue or subtle hints to solutions. Should it involve a mediator or a direct interaction or should it be attempted immediately or in a phased manner. A successful how blends emotional intelligence with procedural clarity for problem solving.

This five-stage model is universal in its application as it can address a wide variety of problems. However, it should not become a hammer in search of nail but a compass to helps us move forward to solve problems. The five interrogatives provide us a means for deeper understanding, precise location of where they occur, provide a clearer context, identify all the concerned parties, to develop a clearer solution for problem resolution.



### 37.The Relationship Kaleidoscope

As a child I was fascinated by kaleidoscope. Growing up I can see kaleidoscopes in most social situations, larger the group, more intricate the design. In kaleidoscopes you need to rotate the device to get different views but in social groups you only need to meet different people to see a completely different pattern though their eyes and get a totally different picture.

Kaleidoscopes play with the seven colours, and in social groups you get four distinct types of people: the shirkers, the submitters, the dominant and the commanders. Despite the nature of the

gathering, be it family, social, religious, business or politics, if the group is large enough you can see all the four groups in action.

**Shirkers** are the one who are forced to participate in the group. Being non-voluntary participants, they have no reason for excitement, nor any interest in the happenings. Many youths we see in religious or social events tagging along with their parents representing this group. In current times, with smart phones, wireless connectivity and earphones, the shirkers physically make up the number, even as they “live” psychologically elsewhere.

**Submitters** have a keen interest to participate in the event with a desired objective to achieve but may believe that they have nothing concrete to offer. They are the most malleable section of the group. Looking to see who can meet their needs, they are on lookout for opportunities where they assist or be helpful. Think of the sales executives in a marketing conference or social event, hunting for prospective clients, like butterflies they hop from group to group in search of nectar, ever helpful but the extent of their exertion depending on their assessment of the prospects potential value.

**Dominant participants** in contrast have something to offer to the group but believe that they have nothing to gain in return. Their participation has all the signs of an obligation being fulfilled. You only need to visualise a Chief Guest at an event or an individual participating in an event they see as below their “standard”. These are shirkers with a difference, for they contribute only if they want. They are often the targets for submitters who are on lookout for potential prospects. This is a mutually beneficial game, where the dominant participants need for importance is met, even as the submitters have their goal in sight.

**Commanders** are by nature fewer in number for they can both contribute and see their goals being realised through the group activity. Organisers of all events fall in this category. Be it a wedding, a marketing conference, a political rally or a musical concert, they are distinguished by their high energy, high activity levels. With a primary stake in the successful staging of the event, they have little regard to their personal need as they go about with vigour to achieve the group goals.

As individuals, we play all the four roles depending on the nature of group and the extent of our participation. Within a month I have often seen myself in all the four roles. Awareness of these distinct roles helped me appreciate them for what they bring to the group and appreciate their value in any group activity. What is your experience? Is there any one role that you predominantly take?



### 38. Investing In a Nutshell

Heaven, for me is a place without money, for I have an aversion to stock markets and money matters. Despite being a finance professional having managed investments for a billion-dollar corporation, I don't like spend my time on investment management. So, I have done the next best thing, which is to engage a trusted wealth manager and given them three broad guidelines for managing my investment. These three guidelines are what I learnt from my four decades

work experience in dealing with money matters.

- i. **Target returns:** Target rate matters for it helps the wealth manager to pick investments. The choice is between an absolute rate which ignores the market returns and a relative return depending on what the market delivers. Picking absolute rate can make you look foolish during bull runs when the markets boom, or you can be a hero earning positive return when the market crashes. Unfortunately, you have to pick your target return first before making the investments for it determines where you invest that decides the risk profile and liquidity of your investments.
- ii. **Risk-return profile:** Risk and return are directly co-related, higher the risk, higher the return. Higher return can be generated using any one or more of the four avenues:
  - a. **Equity over debt:** Debt is a contract for fixed interest and return of capital. It is less risky compared to equity, which is a fluctuating and residual return. If successful, equity rewards handsomely but when things go bad, your entire principle can be lost.
  - b. **Young Companies:** Younger the firm higher the risk. Track record of a firm is a key indicator of risk. Younger firm have higher risk but when successful rewards are worth it. This is why Venture Capitalists seek out new ventures to earn multi baggers, i.e. returns in excess of 100% p.a.

- c. **Concentration:** The popular saying 'do not keep all eggs in one basket' applies to investments too. More concentrated the investment, higher the risk, and if successful the pay-offs are phenomenal and the contrary is true, for bad investment can wipe off the entire capital.
- d. **Leverage:** Leverage is to borrow money at lower rates and invest to get higher returns. Without leverage you can only lose your capital but with leverage you can lose much more. But if your bets pay-off you earn significantly higher returns. An easier way to leverage is futures and options, that looks deceptively attractive as many Indian investors have now learnt.

Risk is a product of desired return, environment and competence. Lower target returns and stable environment translate to lower risk. But where higher return is targeted or the environment is in flux the risk increases. The only factor that can reduce risk is the competence of the decision-maker. Higher the competence lowers the risk.

- iii. **Liquidity:** Higher liquidity translates to lower returns. With illiquid investments, the returns are higher but come with higher risks. Listing of instruments like shares and debentures in stock exchanges combines higher tenure for borrower with higher liquidity for the lender but with some reduction in returns for the investor and higher cost for the company.

As a prudent investor, I target absolute annual returns of 10%+ over a three-year period, with take risk mainly of listed equity shares mitigated by competent wealth managers. This is not the mandate for maximising returns. But my motive is peace of mind, insulated from stock market fluctuations.



### 39.The Art of Delegation

Delegation is an integral part of our lives, be it family, social or in our professional domain. Despite its almost universal need, I have seen a few who have mastered the art of delegation. Analysing some of the best delegators at work, I have identified three critical elements that makes them skilled

artists. Delegation when practiced by a master combines the highest level of **motivation** with a **positive attitude**, and a desire to **learn and equip themselves** with the required skillset to accomplish the delegated task.

**Motivation:** The art of delegation starts with making the delegatee feel valued and the task assigned to them valuable. Think of Tom Sawyer in Mark Twain’s story who got his friends to pay him for the right to paint his fence, or the bricklayers who knows they are building a temple. This sense of value and trust invested in the delegatee heightens their motivation powering their actions. The next element to sustain motivation is to state precisely what is required and the timeline for deliverables. Fully powered and a clear goal, they only need to be steered to accomplish the task.

**Planning:** A motivated delegatee needs to have a clear plan to accomplish the given task. In the initial few assignments, I have seen the delegation-artists engage in focused conversations to help the delegatee create their execution plan. Hearing them out and offering suggestions to refine the plan is a few minutes well spent that can saves many hours if not days of rework. A key element is to acknowledging the merits of the initial plan proposed by the delegatee and offering their experience-based suggestions explaining how they learnt it to make their suggestions appealing and adoptable.

**Knowledge & Skillset:** There may be instances where the delegatee is not equipped with the skillset or the knowledge to undertake the task. Here the master-artists play a key role in equipping them with the skill set and knowledge by coaching. Breaking the task into smaller learnable bits and

periodic supervision to enrich delegatee's skill set will make them more valuable and effective.

**Attitude:** A motivate and skilled delegatee, with a clear execution plan may still not be able to accomplish the desired task. Often when they hit a roadblock or hurdle, they need help. Encouraging them to proactively reach out for help when stuck, or helping them overcome their hurdles through periodic stocktake not only keeps them engaged but also shapes their attitude to the task on hand.

In retrospect, the art of delegation is not very different from parenting. It requires a bit of love, a lot of belief in their ability, patience to guide, and a sense of joint ownership in the outcome. Successful delegation is like a partnership where both the delegator and the delegatee benefit from the win and are eagerly poised for much greater tasks ahead.

Is your experience similar or would you like to add or modify what is said here.



#### 40. Breeds of a Kind

The world of commerce has units that differ significantly to encompass both economic and social organisations. Further these could be either for-profit or not-for-profit organisations. Given this spectrum, we have four distinct breeds, with economic for-profit organisations at one end and social not-for-profit organisations at the other end. In between, are

the two hybrids of economic not-for-profit organisations, and the social for-profit organisations to meet our material needs.

The most common of the four is **business organisations**, i.e. economic, for-profit units. Organised as sole-proprietor, partnerships and companies, they are driven by profits serving human needs. Providing goods and services they are essential for human survival, for we cannot think of a world without them. One shortcoming with this breed is that they only serve the better offs of the world, leaving the worse off on their own.

The response to serve the needs of worse off sections in our societies was primarily taken by individuals and families. The early **social, not-for-profit** institutions that emerged to cater to their needs were of religious denominations like temples, Buddhist Sanghas, Church and Islamic waqf. It was only around 1850s with the advent of industrial revolution and rapid urbanisation that social not-for-profit organisations came up to meet this unmet need initially addressing the challenge of education, healthcare and housing. Despite their large numbers today, 3.1 million unregistered NGOs in India alone, their size is small and inadequate to meet the acute need of this section.

**Cooperatives** were an interesting answer to the growing need of the worse-off sections of our society as their lack of resources made them unattractive to business units to serve them. Evolution of human society since inception has seen cooperative ventures where individuals have pooled their scarce resources to meet the needs of a group. Early farming practices of shared

water, equipment, and animals to plough the fields are all well documented. However, it was the rapid urbanisation in 1800s that led to the advent of cooperative ventures, which are economic not-for-profit organisations. In India, The Societies Registration Act, 1860 marks the recognition for economic not-for-profit organisations, visible in urban India today as cooperative banks and cooperatives directly selling farm produce to consumers.

**Social for-profit enterprises** are the youngest kids on the block emerging only in 1970s and 80s. The rise of free market proponents like Regan in the US and Thatcher in England saw not-for-profits struggle to survive as funds dried up even as the enthusiasm of people to serve the worse-off did not. Social for-profit enterprises by self-imposed mandate limit their profit margins and cap their returns to investors are driven by ethical consumers, purpose driven workers, socially conscious investor, and supported by governments that found themselves short on meeting the growing needs of the worse off in societies.

Despite the variety, and the rare exception of AMUL in India, it is only the economic for-profit breed that thrives. The other three despite their lofty goals are struggling. The recent push for mandating CSR by getting large corporates to invest 2% of their profits has seen little impact on this front. How do you think we can address this challenge?



### 43. IPOs With A Difference

Fund raising for a NGO is a monumental task and, in my view, the most challenging job anywhere in the world. My engagement with social sector and not-for-profit organisations taught me a lot and one of the key learnings was

the IPOs with a difference. IPO-OI, is a five-stage analysis of initiatives that considers Input, Process, Output, Outcome and the Impact. One of the key reasons for the use of this frequent analysis is the need to raise funds. While NGOs are focused on IPO, the donors often do not see beyond OI.

Donors are attracted by the visible OI, i.e. Outcome and Impact. However, the NGOs raising funds are focused on the IPO, i.e. Inputs required, refining their Process, and optimising their desired Output. They believed that OI is a logical follow through of their IPO; adequate inputs, diligently followed process resulting in the desired Output. The hyphen in IPO-OI is easy to insert but one of the most difficult bridges to connect.

Driven by purpose, constrained by funds, could be the tagline of most fundraising teams in NGOs. Fundraising, which should be a peripheral activity, becomes the primary imperative draining the energy of most social entrepreneurs. Skilled story tellers, talented marketing professionals and persuasive grant writers are the need. But lack of resources forces many NGOs to rely on goodwill of donors and sincerity of their purpose as the two primary drivers for their fund-raising efforts.

Donors with resources face a major challenge. Like the proverbial 'once bitten twice shy', their bad experience with unethical NGOs that have misused funds colour their decision making. Despite wanting to donate, they are restrained by the nagging fear that they may be duped. With limited time, their search for an authentic NGO forces them to look at OI, i.e. outcome and impact. This is the only way they can ascertain if their contributions are judiciously spent, and properly used to generate the desired output.

One of the downsides in bridging the Donor-NGO divide is a short-term focus by NGOs on Output that often sacrifices OI in their bid to sustain their operations and showcase results, as OI takes time to become visible. Likewise, donors with excessive focus on OI often desist from funding the necessary and critical overheads of operations required to manage a program successfully, starving the NGOs of funds and reducing the effectiveness of their own donations.

The primary measure of Impact of any social program is in the number of lives touched and the difference it has made to their lives. While a narrow view looks only at the beneficiaries of the NGO program, a broader view would look in addition at the impact it has made to the NGO team and the donors in their thinking and action.

Fundraising when done right, is transformational. It transforms the donors from patrons into trusting partners, and NGOs from viewing their donors as mere moneybags to mentors, who together can collaborate to realise their sublime goals.



## Euphemism in Economics

Euphemism is a polite way for saying something harsh, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Calling older people, senior citizens, or a fat person well fed, or sacking employees letting them go, are some examples. But economists have mastered the art of euphemism: to sell bitter medicine in sweet tablets for more than a century. Just think will people vote for economics panics, turning regulatory bodies into

businesses, lending to people with poor credit history, or promoting individual interest over national interest. But this is what economists, and policy makers have successfully done.

Calling borrowers with poor credit records as sub-prime credit fuelled the US housing boom. Smart investment bankers sold inferior mortgages bundled together as sub-prime financial instruments to pension funds and mutual funds leading to the credit crisis in 2008 resulting in Lehman Brothers collapse. Driven by profits, the rich bankers fuelled the bubble bigger and bigger till it burst and pushed the global economy into a major recession.

Rich investment bankers benefited from selling poor credit instruments and when the bubble burst, the cost of economic recovery of hundreds of billions of dollars was borne by the US government, i.e. the masses bailed out large financial institutions that profited from the bubble. A huge cost but for the euphemism of calling poor credit as sub-prime, it may not have happened.

Stock exchanges, the quasi-regulators for stock trading were commercialised across the globe in the last few decades. It did not get the deserved attention as it was euphemistically called de-mutualisation, to prevent public outcry. Until the 1980's, stock-exchanges were primarily run as a stock brokers' co-operatives for mutual benefit. They had the limited financial goal of recovering their operational costs. With de-mutualisation, or to be more explicit commercialisation, stock exchanges today are commercial enterprises owned by shareholders and run to maximise profits. Is the unfettered growth of derivatives that we see in India a result of this?

While Sub-prime crisis cost the masses billions of dollars, only time will tell how commercialisation of stock exchanges will affect the masses. Today only the ill-equipped derivative trader is losing money but tomorrow? I hope I am proved wrong but human history unfortunately has shown otherwise.

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century reduction in economic activity in a country was called panics as it resulted in unemployment and heightened people's distress. 1907 was a famous panic in the USA. Following the 1929 stock market crash and the resulting panic, the incumbent President Herbert Hoover used the euphemism of depression to reduce negative sentiment in the runup to re-elections. Despite the sugar coating, he lost the elections as the poor were hard hit.

When the 1930's depression deepened, it earned the title of the Great Depression. We saw a repeat of this sentiment play out following the 2008 Lehman Brothers crash, when each time the term 'great depression' was used, it was subtly countered by great recession, a much milder term.

The much-touted globalization was eagerly embraced in 1980s across the world by the unsuspecting public. Little did they know they were promoting individual businesses to maximise their profits at the cost of national interest. This euphemism wore out when the interest of the richest, the US economy, was adversely affected; result the recent tariff wars initiated by Donald Trump. National interest now replaces globalisation across the world as each country tries to protect itself.

My take away, whenever euphemism is used by the policy makers or the rich businesses, always check their latent motive, as we will pay the price, if not now, surely later.



## 45.The Human Theatre

In the drama of human life, response to uncertainty can take any one of the four avenues. You can be the optimist who sees light ahead, or the pessimist who fears every shadow, the fatalist who is resigned to whatever happens

or the fanatic who believe they can rewrite any play. While optimistic and pessimist are more frequently used labels, fanatic and fatalist are the stronger but lesser used labels. But understanding all the four types is critical for knowing their value and how to collaborate with them.

Just imagine leaders of social movements fighting long and hard battle with victory nowhere in the horizon. What keeps them going and motivated if not their positive outlook to life. Think of Nelson Mandela in prison for 27 years with no sight of resolution for apartheid. Optimists take initiative, ignore setbacks and remain motivated and engaged in their long journey surviving only on their positive outlook. But for the optimists, our world would not have seen the stupendous progress we have made on all the fronts.

Pessimist too play a key role in ensuring that the optimists reach their goals. Their ability to anticipate risks and visualise failures is critical for ensuring that we overcome these hurdles and reach our goal. As the pessimists sap our energy and dent our motivation, there are not many historical figures who are renowned pessimists as success erases our memory of their contribution. But they are remembered in the world of art, painting what the world can descend into, to enable us to guard against it. We need to see them as scouts looking out for threats that we need to address on our path to progress.

While it is prudent not to be a fatalist, surrendering to the circumstances and avoiding resistance, yet they teach us a very valuable lesson, the spirit of resilience. The emotional state to face problems that are unresolvable, and continue to live within the limitations we have is what every human needs to survive. Wisdom is in accepting the problems that we cannot solve and face the situation as is. Like salt that enhances the flavour of our food, a pinch of fatalism is essential for our living.

A fanatic is the complete opposite of the fatalist, for they believe that reality will conform to their belief. They act with a zeal, reject nuances and see opposition to their views as evil. Unrestrained they create havoc for they do not tolerate alternatives. Fanatics are like torches, they light up the path but uncontrolled they can burn down the entire house.

For creating the garden of life that we want to live in, we need Optimists, the gardener who plant seeds even in drought trusting it will rain, and the Pessimist, who watch our garden and keeps it free of pests and weeds for us to harvest. Like in food, we need the fatalist like a pinch of salt to enhance the taste but be aware that too much it can render our food inedible. Living in a beautiful garden with appetizing food, we need the fanatics to light up new ways for our progress, being fully aware that uncontrolled, like torches they can burn down our garden.

Easier said than done, a happy live is in being optimistic in vision, pessimistic in visualising hurdles that we may come across, fatalistic in accepting what we know we cannot change, and fanatically love humanity, peace and non-violence. Tough it is but we can always try....



## 46. Listening -My Known Weakness

Despite conscious efforts I am a bad listener. The three symptoms of my malaise are prematurely judge what the speaker is about to say based on their first few words, preparing my response even as they are speaking, and focusing on substance to lose sight of the emotions of the speaker. You would think this awareness should help me get better but sadly this has not been the case till now.

Attempt to improve my listening skills has me browsing articles, blogs and even books on how to listen better. Here is a summary of my learnings. Hope writing them down will help me get better. It is also a call for help from others who have successfully conquered it to share what they did.

I found that there are ten different types of listening based on our intent:

- i. **Inquisitive**, where the aim is to learn. Either we have asked a question or a question in our mind is being answered, like listening after asking for direction while travelling.
- ii. **Intentional**, where we are listening to learn something new or have a problem to solve, like an automobile mechanic listening to a defective motor to identify the problem.
- iii. **Reflective**, where you want your thinking to be validated and see if what you hear fits in with your personal experience
- iv. **Appreciative**, to enjoy and savour what you hear, like praise, complements or the post-match analysis showing how good your team was.
- v. **Critical**, where we want to evaluate and refute what the other person is saying, especially when they are not in agreement with us.
- vi. **Selective**, where we have a predetermined objective and are filtering out the irrelevant material to hear only what we want to hear
- vii. **Sympathetic**, while greeting a person in a social event, where the focus is on emotions of the event and not necessarily the spoken words
- viii. **Empathetic**, in situations involving bereavement, where we need to communicate our support with or often without words

- ix. **Passive**, doing it as a chore, without participation or involvement. A duty being fulfilled.
- x. **Active**, to be fully engaged and respond only to seek clarifications, and later gently present our views for the speakers' consideration.

Of the ten listed, I was able to immediately identify where my listening skills are inadequate. In the first five, I believe I am reasonably good but my challenge is in the second five. Reflecting further, I realise my SIN: of not **Suspending** judgment, not **Interpreting** nonverbal clues, and not **Nurturing** the dialogue with constructive questions.

I believe listening is not just a desirable skill but a respect we pay to speakers. In all fairness, just as we want to be heard, we need to hear others. Not mechanically but with full engagement, using our cognitive skills to hear what is said both explicitly and implicitly in words, tone, and body language, emotionally engaging by respecting the speaker sentiment, and displaying our engagement by behaviour that effectively conveys interest and involvement.

Till now, I have used only one ear. From now, I need to consciously use both the ears we have been given. Trust you will see a better me, next time.



#### 47. Executive Presence

In the initial days of my career, I was surprised to see a few of my colleagues make a big impact on the leadership team despite similar work contribution. Later in my career too, I found that some executives had what I had by then learnt called the 'Executive Presence', that set them apart. On reflection, I found that many of these young impact makers were children of IAS officers or top-ranking executives who had imbibed their parents' behaviour. There were the odd exceptions

too who had learnt these key skills despite hailing from middleclass families.

On exploring this domain and validating them with my personal observations, I could identify four critical elements that stand out, namely their presence, gravitas, communication and credibility. These being skills that can be learnt, I have tried to share this with willing youngsters who want to imbibe these skills to match their work place impact with their work contribution.

**Presence:** My first encounter with the need to make a good impact at work place was when I joined my CA Articles training. My boss before sending us to large companies for audit emphasised the need for us to dress in sober colour and design, wear polished shoes and be well groomed. Later in my career when I had to go to large financial institutions to borrow money, my boss who recently had joined us from a multinational corporation insisted that we wear tie to work and on all official visits outside our office. Later, when our fundraising initiatives expanded overseas, the need for suits and blazers emerged. These experiences made me realise that presence communicates authenticity, which is essential for success.

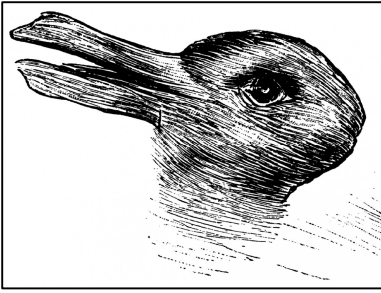
**Gravitas:** An impressive presence is only the start. To sustain, gravitas is needed. Gravitas is what we see when we interact with members of armed forces and elite commando groups. Their impressive uniform is matched by their silent authority that comes from an erect posture, dignified silence, and purposeful movement. They speak without even uttering a word. We can see

the same gravitas with many bankers and corporate leaders that make us pay attention to what they say.

**Communication:** With an effective presence and gravitas, we have a ready audience. The main impact begins when we start to talk. Clear thoughts, appropriate language, and emotional intelligence to sense the mood of the occasion before talking is the bridge that connects. Humour plays a key role to lighten situations but needs judicious use. Subtle hints work but overused, it dilutes gravitas.

**Credibility:** For sustained executive presence, credibility is the visible superstructure. Though built on the foundation of presence, gravitas and communication, what leaves a lasting impression is credibility. Reflected in punctuality, thoughtfulness with which commitments are made, and visible effort taken to record every commitment made reflects sincerity and respect to our partner. Delivering on your promises especially small ones, admitting mistakes and accepting accountability goes a long way in building credibility.

Executive presence is your character performing. Though influenced by parents initially, it is not inherited but consciously cultivated. It is not about dominating but influencing conversations and decisions. In short, executive presence is where posture meets purpose.



#### **48. Anatomy of Conflicts**

Conflicts are the spice of life, taking many shapes and sizes, ranging from wars fought by nations, to boardroom battle for control, and disputes between friends and family members. In measured servings it flavours our lives and sharpens our edges to develop and grow. However, an excess

dose or a chronic conflict can be stressful, hampering our lives.

Finding the source of a conflict is the key to its resolution. Conflicts could emerge from any one of the four reasons: Conflicting objectives, Ego or personality clash, lack of Emotional intelligence, and Miscommunication. Identifying the source is not just diagnostic but curative too as it helps in resolving the conflict and building trust that is essential for sustained collaboration.

**Tug of war** is a good analogy for describing conflicting objectives. When people with opposing objectives need to work together, or when scarce resource is needed by both the parties, conflicts emerge, as win for one means the loss for the other. These battles often transform into wars, in the proverbial 'fight unto death' mode.

In the corporate world, it could be the sales team pursuing aggressive growth wanting to cut corners, blocked by the compliance team responsible for compliance. A basic principle for resolving these conflicts is to rise one level above the competing entities, i.e. take the corporate view instead of a functional view. It is only by moving to the next higher-level entity and viewing it from a larger goal of company profitability that we can find a win-win solution.

**Making a mountain of a molehill** is a good way to visualise conflicts arising from ego that is visible as personality conflicts. By magnifying small differences, it can disrupt any productive relationship into a dis-functional one. Identity, pride or status of a party threatened leads to these conflicts. Often the aggrieved party being the emotionally 'weaker' one needs

reassurance to get the relationship back on track. Where a conflict of objectives is shrewdly projected by the “aggrieved” party as an ego clash, we need to invoke the higher-level entity goals to resolve the issue.

Like **Colour blindness**, emotional blindness is the lack of emotional intelligence. It is the inability to recognize, understand, or manage emotions. It creates conflicts where none exists. If ego magnifies small differences, lack of emotional intelligence can see differences where none exists. Optimal resolution in this case is to listen with empathy, and acknowledge their emotional state, give them time to see the real situation while provide them with a honourable exit without loss of face.

**Miscommunication** is often the most common source of conflicts. Here, what is said by one is not what is understood by the other, resulting in differences. Often the reason for miscommunication could be preconceived notions about conflicting objectives and believing the others are out to exploit them. The fastest way to resolve it is to recognize miscommunications as and when they arise and clarify, or still better to prevent it with clear communication to avoid any chance of misinterpretation.

Conflicts need not be always viewed negatively unless it is causing physical damage. Often it is a symptom of missing alignment, lack of trust, inferiority complex, situations needing empathy or need for clearer communication. Conflicts cannot be resolved by ignoring it but by listen with empathy, clarifying the purpose, and respecting the other party we can resolve it. This is easier said than done, highlighting the huge gap between knowledge and wisdom. While knowledge is seen in words, wisdom is only seen in practice.



## 49. Emotions Ignite

Risk is a captivating topic. I am fascinated by why some embrace risk, while others shun it. My personal experience with smoking and investing gave me some insights into both. After I stopped smoking, I began to wonder how intelligent and sane individuals

can smoke despite knowing that it is a proven health hazard. Likewise, I wonder why I choose a conservative investing style for the last two decades despite seeing the crazy bull market run. Having explored the domain of risk management professionally in my career as the Corporate Treasurer of large corporate, I am able to relate commercial risk taking with personal habits too. What is common to both is human nature that triggers action.

Risk awareness and risk taking is not just about intellectual knowledge but emotional experiences. Damage does not drive action but outrages do. Shockingly, humans are like frogs who do not jump out of water being boiled; they need to be thrown into boiling water for them to jump out of it. You can validate this by asking many smokers who have stopped as to what triggered it. We will find that it is emotions that ignite, while intellect is ignored.

Risk mitigation, even at an intellectual level is a distinct five stage process. Of sensing the latent risk, to its hazy perception, leading gradually to its visibility, before being acknowledged, and finally being managed. The pace at which we pass through these five stages depends on our sensitivity. Some are only sensitive to their own pain, while others learn from pain they see around them.

Latent risk is mainly felt but not seen. A novice and expert are both hypersensitive to risks. While the novice's sensitivity comes from inexperience, the expert's sensitivity is insight led. Often the first few experts who talk about latent risk are liable to be dismissed as a novice or behaving like a novice.

Perceived risk is when there is a hazy perception felt by more people. Yet, it is vague and cannot be clearly described. It is attributed to a gut feel and a sense of discomfort. But as discomfort levels rise their buzz moves from periphery to centre stage.

Visible risk is when the first signs of damage emerge. The early risk perceivers are now heard and have a growing and attentive audience. This amplification draws in risk management experts and the victims sharing their experience of damage catch attention and are painted in gory details, triggering emotions. This brings risk into the centre stage and focus for all to see and respond.

Acknowledged risk is when the decision makers, regulators and law makers debate the alternative course of actions and propose mitigation plans for consideration.

Active risk management starts when conscious decisions are made on risk, to minimise exposure, outsource it, or insure it. A critical factor in this decision making is the judgement on competence to manage risk and the rewards of risk taking. Where it is a “pure” risk, i.e. no gains from taking it, only losses, the easiest option is to avoid it. But when unavoidable, insure it by paying a premium. On the other hand, where the risk is “speculative”, i.e. successful risk management results in rewards, the option is between accepting the risk or outsourcing it. The decision between the two depends on the competency of the player. If competent accept it, if not outsource it to a competent player by paying a premium.

Crudely put, life is all about risk management. Our risk appetite depends on our sensitivity to risk and our competence. Shift in risk appetite is triggered by emotions on exposure to outrages.



## 50. Nature vs Nurture Debate

For long I have been intrigued by the nature vs. nurture debate. Are qualities like leadership, character, dedication and talent inborn abilities or can they be cultivated? The Greek Philosopher Plato believed in the concept of innate

knowledge and the soul as the vehicle for this transmission. On the other hand, thinkers like John Locke and Jean Rousseau believed human mind is *tabula rasa*, i.e. a blank slate. The qualities individuals acquire are based on their environment and education. This debate has more than a theoretical importance for it determines quite a lot of what we believe and how we react to what we see in the society around us.

On the basic issue of an individual's responsibility for their actions, the nature centric view does not hold the individual fully responsible and attributes it to their biological trait. 'It is not my fault, I was born this way' is often a response heard, as they see aggression, talent or empathy as hardwired. The nurture-centric view on the other hand emphasises personal and collective responsibility. They see behaviour as being shaped by upbringing, education, and culture and hence malleable. Parents, teachers, and institutions are responsible for shaping individuals.

Ownership or accountability follows responsibility. Attributing success or failure to innate ability can lead to discrimination, resulting in elitism or exclusions. Linking this to individuals can result in crediting some with leadership skills while eliminating for rest the option to lead but when it gets linked to lineage or race, it can result in segregated societies. Where character is seen as the result of nurture, ownership is joint and credit for achievements is shared. It fosters humility and gratitude and a propensity to collaborate.

Humans are social animals, and how we relate to one-another is the essence of relationship. Seeing individuals with fixed qualities makes human interactions transactional and limited to perceived compatibility. Where

individuals are seen with malleable qualities, empathy and adaptability is encouraged, and the relationships become dynamic and provides opportunities for transformation.

On the basic issue of equality, the nature viewers have grounds to justify inequality. If intelligence or temperament is inherited and innate, disparities are seen as natural. Meritocracy turns biologically. With nurture view, the logic for providing equal opportunity is strong. With right conditions, anyone can flourish. Hence, policies and actions focus on access, inclusion, and systemic reform.

I inherently believed in the nurture view and desperately wanted it to be true. But faced with innate skills in genius child prodigies I could not ignore the nature theory. However recently, my doubt in this regard was to a large extent clarified, when I came across the idea of seeing innate abilities as the first draft of the “book”, and environment, which includes the parents, teachers, society and the individual as “editors”, who can add, delete, or modify the draft.

We humans can add missing traits, delete undesirable ones or modify it to suit the evolving environment in most cases. While there are a few difficult to “edit” very strong first drafts, in most cases edit is possible. I now see that in a few cases of extremes at either end, innate ability defines. But in most others, environment can nurture for the better.



## 51. Six Stages of Acceptance

Progress can also be viewed as accepting the new, be it ideas, offerings or environment. Often this acceptance is not immediate or voluntary for habits or comfort of the familiar is tough to discard. While with minor changes the distinct stages of progress may not be visible, with major changes it is easy to see these six stages in both individuals and organisations as they

respond to new ideas, people, or challenges. Each stage can be clearly linked with a corresponding behaviour that reveals the state of the acceptance.

**I. Rejection seen in Opposition:** Unfamiliarity breeds fear or discomfort. An individual or organisation in a position of comfort view any change to their status quo with suspicion. Often the opposition is not a considered choice but an instinctive reaction triggered by the fear of unknown.

**II. Indifference seen in Ignoring:** Once the initial opposition fades, indifference sets in. Energy is not expended in attacks, the belief is that by ignoring, the change will disappear. Dismissed as irrelevant, the new idea is not actively opposed but passively ignored, a diluted form of opposition.

**III. Tolerance seen in Coexistence:** Though not acceptance, it signals a truce, for it tolerates minimum presence and often patronized coexistence. Its presence is accepted as long as it does not disrupt the status quo. Often seen as a pilot project not scaled, or the new dish only “sampled”, the focus is to avoid conflict, without any commitment.

**IV. Consideration seen in Evaluation:** True acceptance begins with a positive effort of a fair evaluation of its merits. Investment follows, of time, effort and money. This is the stage where ideas are assessed for the full-fledged adoption, or change in habits, the gateway to acceptance.

**V. Acceptance seen in Substitution:** Acceptance post evaluation is seen in the new replacing the old. With benefits recognized, it is integrated into the lifestyle, reflecting different elements of its benefits.

**VI. Advocacy seen in Recommendation:** The final stage of acceptance is advocacy or recommending it to new audience. The initial opponent becomes its staunch advocate. The idea once ignored becomes the ideal.

These six stages are like a ladder. Each rung reflecting a deeper engagement. Be it a social change, a new tool or personal habit the journey from opposition to championing it is natural. The younger you are the faster you move. So, measure you age not by looking at the calendar but how quickly you climb the rungs. Youngsters often skip the initial few rungs! How young are you?



## 52.The Long Journey Ahead

I wonder often why I don't do what is right. How can I consciously ignore the right path and step on the wrong one despite knowing it. I found the answer when I came across the contrast between *jnana* or knowledge that is hearsay, and *vijnana* which is experiential

knowledge. In other words, *jnana* can turn into *vijnana* when it is experienced and is internalised to become intuitive. Intuitive knowledge is seen not just in words but is transformed into wisdom that is reflected in our conduct.

Knowledge only lights up the paths available, while it is values that trigger behaviour. The paths can be either self-centred, instant gratification or eco-system centred, enduring benefits. What we choose depends on what we value: immediate fleeting pleasure or the delayed but enduring bliss. Our choice is heavily influenced by the 3 Es, our environment, education and experience. Environmental influence of our family, friends and our role models give us hearsay knowledge, while educational learnings from both formal and informal instructions received, and personal experiences can convert it to experiential knowledge or wisdom.

Our actions reflect our values. A key element of value is what we see as a means and an end. It is logical that if we are not at our destination, we need some means to travel to it. Means in today's world often translate to money, or ways to acquire money. It is possible that we may become enamoured with money and make our means an end in itself. Are not people who see money or wealth as an end in itself called misers?

With the means, we can satisfy our needs or hunger; our hunger for pleasure, wealth, power, or knowledge. As realised by our experiences, human mind seeks novelty and increasing intensity to sustain its engagement with pleasure. While for some the search for novelty is adequate, for others boredom is inevitable, sooner or later but for sure. What is their option?

The awareness that boredom is the inevitable end in the search for pleasure, can lead us to something beyond pleasure. It could be the 'Being the Best' of

pursuing excellence to improve each day over what we were yesterday, or going beyond ourselves to 'Helping the Rest', or looking into the future to 'Build a Better Nest', to make our earth a better place.

Our engagement in pursuit beyond means and pleasure can be either a "hobby" to be pursued in our spare time, when we are bored, or it can become a way of life, the very essence of our existence where we are totally committed to our goal every second of our existence. Can this be an end in itself? I believe that it can, as in a vast destination that we arrive at where exploration is endless. Improving ourselves, helping the rest or making tomorrow better offer infinite scope with no end in sight.

How far I travel in this journey depends on how much I internalise this knowledge and make it intuitive, that is make it my own. On retrospect, my sixty-five years existence has not taken me very far in this journey. I have a long way to go.....

### **About Shankar Jaganathan**

**Shankar** is passionate about economic history, sustainability practices and corporate governance. A proponent for a fair and equitable society he spends his retired life between reading, writing, playing table-tennis, corporate consulting and a couple of board positions.

A chartered accountant and a law graduate, his professional life of four decades spanned corporate, academic and social sectors in Wipro, CimplifyFive, Right Horizons, Indian Institute of Science, Union Bank Staff Training College, Azim Premji University, Azim Premji Foundation, and Oxfam India.

Shankar is the author of Corporate Disclosures: 1553-2007, The Origin of Financial and Business Reports, published by Routledge in 2008 and The Wisdom of Ants, A Brief History of Economics, published in November 2012, and reprinted in January 2024. The original ideas in both these books led to Shankar being named in 2013 and 2015 list of top 50 Management Thinkers in India by Thinkers50 a London based consulting firm.