

The Art of Living

The Art of Living can be defined as a classical notion in philosophy that refers to a kind of self-direction with a view to the good life.



Almost all people live in freedom, according to their will, while some do not. As they live in a world of diversity, they are tied to various concepts, beliefs, rituals, cultures, and rules. Can they live according to their will if they are subjected to the regulations and needs of others? It depends on the manner of living or the 'Art of Living'. One can see it when a person looks beyond their own limited world. Isn't it a priceless asset for a person to see the world with a free mind without any norms, values, or prejudice? Some are free thinkers, and some are philosophers because they do not have any bondages.

At this point, if one looks at the history of human beings, he can see that they have been living different lifestyles, some of them individually or in groups. For instance, if we take the whole world, it's been divided into two; Western and Eastern. Therefore, the philosophy was also recognized as Western philosophy and Eastern philosophy. Can one stop at that point? No, because the lifestyle, or

the art of living, is divided into two, Western and Eastern, whether one likes it or not.

On the other hand, Easterners think Western philosophy is excellent, but new Western scholars say that if you want to get real philosophy, you have to go to the East. Therefore, it is essential to peruse that matter called philosophy.

Generally, philosophy means “A theory of attitude that acts as a guiding principle for behavior.” The behavior of a human being is indeed influenced by the individual’s life and other things in the world. In our attempt to discuss philosophy, first of all, it’s worth talking about western philosophy. As almost everyone knows, Socrates of Athens (469-399 B.C.E.) was famous for his contribution to Greek philosophy, which laid the foundation for Western Philosophy. Hence, it is considered that he was the ‘Father of Western Philosophy’. Some individuals believe that Socrates was the founder of Western Psychology as well, according to some arguments and speeches made by him.

Although Socrates is famous in the world as a philosopher, there were some more philosophers in the west. One of them, Thales (585 B.C.E.), is a remarkable philosopher. According to the Philosophy Pages, he was a “pre- Socratic philosopher who first proposed a rational explanation of the natural world.” Thales is supposed to have held that ‘All is water’. His Milesian followers commonly disagree with this. But his student, Anaximander, rejected it, saying: “This answer is far too simple.” Focusing attention on the changing face of the universe, he supposed “That all matters result from the distillation of hot, cold, dry, and wet elements.” By examining fossil evidence, he persuaded people to believe that living beings developed from simple to more complex forms. But this view of Pythagoras about human life is completely different from others. Though he was a mathematician, he led a school of philosophy with followers known as the Pythagoreans. “Pythagoreans believe that the soul ‘transmigrates’ into other living bodies at death, with animals and plants participating along with human beings in a grand cycle of reincarnation.” - The Origins of Western Thought: Philosophy Pages.

Although the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus (540-475 B.C.E.) rejected the Pythagorean view of life, he saw the natural world as a perpetual struggle and a strife-plagued place. He supposed that ‘all is flux’ and revealed that “Everything is changing all the time. Upon stepping into the same river, different water

flows.” He saw a specific characteristic in the great majority of human beings as a lack of understanding. Furthermore, he declared some features of human life: “Of this world’s

being, forever do men prove to be uncomprehending, both before they hear it and once they have heard it. Other men are unaware of what they do when they are awake, just as they forget what they do when they are asleep. Most people sleep-walk through life without understanding what is happening around them.”

So, we can say Heraclitus is correct in observing most of the characters in human life. Sometimes it may just be their lifestyle. Ancient philosophers began to put forward their views in the sixth century, experimenting with external and internal human life. Some, including rulers, opposed these new views about human life and the world. Meanwhile, after a few decades, we can see the great philosophy of Athenian Socrates. After working as a soldier and a stonemason, he spent the rest of his life as a philosopher. As stated in a newsletter: “Socrates devoted his time to free-wheel discussion with the aristocratic young citizens of Athens.” -P.P. 1/3. P. But the Athenian jury found him guilty of corrupting the youth and interfering with religion and sentenced him to death. Furthermore, it is said, “Accepting this outcome with remarkable grace, Socrates drank hemlock and died in the company of his friends and disciples.” - P.P. 1/3. P. Socrates was a nice and wise man; he did not accept defeat.

Instead, as some say, he drank a half cup of poison, preached the balance of his philosophy to his disciples, and drank the balance and died. On the other hand, as there were no written scripts at the time, we have to peruse the early dialogues of his students, including Plato. In particular, Plato reproduced Socrates’ philosophy as well. He says, “Destroying the illusion that we already comprehend that the world is perfect and honestly accepting the fact of our ignorance. Socrates believed, are vital steps towards our acquisition of genuine knowledge by discovering universal definitions of the key concepts, governing human life.” - P.P. 1/3 P. Besides that, he systematically refuted the superficial notion of piety, and he determined whether or not virtue can be taught. Although his direct answer was that virtue was unteachable, he proposed the doctrine of recollection. He argued that no human ever knowingly does evil: we all invariably do what we believe is best. Socrates and others thought that all virtues must be cultivated together.

Additionally, according to a few clauses in 'One Hundred Great Lives' (The Home Library Club), we can understand the so-called Western philosophy. It is said, "But Socrates cared little for death. He believed in the survival of the soul, and he believed in virtue. His religion was not that he... which was the official worship of Athens". Not only that, he emphasized virtue and mind: "Without goodness, a man was nothing; Socrates believed that all men would seek goodness if they had true knowledge of it; that all virtue was the knowledge of goodness, all sin was ignorance of goodness.". About the mind: "The man was something of a mystic, and yet he was essentially practical. It is said of him that he stood for twenty-four hours 'wrapped in thought'".

By submitting these views of his great master (Socrates), Plato has also given some valuable concepts to the world. In some readers' opinions, they appreciate his 'Platonic Love' concept. Its definition, according to Merriam- Webster, is 1: Plato conceived of love as ascending from passion for the individual to contemplation of the universal and ideal.

2. A close relationship between two people in which sexual desire is absent, suppressed, or sublimated. It is interconnectedness: in a family, among the teachers and the disciples, and it is practically worth it for the rulers in a country towards their countrymen for a peaceful and prosperous kingdom.

After a few centuries of Greek Philosophy, there's a new virtue today, introduced by the WHO to the whole world to be protected from Corona (COVID-19), published in a 'Health Newsletter': "If you touch your nose, if you touch your eyes, Corona will touch your body." They also maintained keeping two meters between two people. They call it an 'imposed restriction'. Reading through Western philosophy in a nutshell, we'll look forward to discussing Eastern philosophy in the following article.



Ven Diypattugama Revatha Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Siriwardhanaramaya Temple, Kollupitiya.