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From Curiosity to Knowledge, from Knowledge to
Wisdom:
Two Tales from Ancient Asian Thoughts

Given another time, it would have been a great delight to be here, in Lublin, to celebrate ideas and friendship with you. This distressing Pandemic and the sad conflict happening just across your border have prevented people to interact in person and human presence. Allow me instead, to wish you safety and good health and we all hope this comes to pass soonest.

Today, I take delight in having to share with you, tales from two ancient worlds of China and India. The stories may seem different from those that have been often told to you. It should serve as an invitation for you to find some insights, or even discover parallel views with another civilization. Education is not a monopoly of one culture, it is a shared endeavor of both East and West. Listening to something from a different worldview, and understanding a different perspective on viewing reality are activities that have to be pursued in a global age.

The first story comes from a work by an ancient Chinese philosopher *Lie Zi* (450 – 375 BC). It is a chapter of the work that was titled 愚公移山 *Yu Gong Yi Shan*, “*The Foolish Old Man*

*Who Removed the Mountains.*¹ It is an ancient fable that has been revived by Chinese litterateur and philosophers alike from generation to generation because of the powerful message it carries.

There were two huge mountains named *Tai Hang* 太行 and *Wang Wu* 王屋, located south of *Ji Zhou* 冀州 and north of the *Yellow River* 黄河. *Yu Gong*, literally signifying a Foolish old man, is a ninety-year-old man and he lived just in front of the said majestic mountains. Every time *Yu Gong* and his family want to go to the town, they were greatly inconvenienced because the mountains blocked their way, they have to walk a remarkable distance around the mountains before reaching their destination.

One day, the ninety-year-old man *Yu Gong* gathered his family to discuss a solution. *Yu Gong* proposed that they should level the mountains to make a straight route to the south, it would make it easier for them to navigate the distance.

His wife scorned him arguing that at his advanced age and as a frail man, who could not even level a small hill, how much more leveling the two majestic mountains. Moreover, she questioned where they would dump those rocks, stones, soil, and dirt they dug up if they ever succeeded. But the rest of the members of the family supported the proposal of *Yu Gong*. Everybody said that they would carry the stones and soil to the shore of the *Bo Sea*.

The following day, *Yu Gong*, his sons, and grandsons initiated the laborious project, painstakingly excavated masses of soil, broke up large rocks, and carried them in baskets to the shore of the *Bo Sea*. They worked daily incessantly rain or shine.

¹列子Book of Lie Zi Ch. 5 Heaven's Gift. It is An ancient Chinese legend, the foolish old man moved the mountain 愚公移山, which was recorded in the ancient philosophy book *Lie Zi* “列子” which was written by a philosopher named *Lie Yu Kou* 列御寇. Also, This story was retold by Liu Xiang Garden of Stories; cited in the Speech of Chairman Mao Ze Dong, and again by the father of modern Chinese literature Lu Xun (See Lu Xun Selected Works). It has various English translations to this work but for today, we take the translated title, “The Foolish Old Man Moves a Mountain”.

Zhi Sou 智叟, literally a Wise old man, learning about *Yu Gong's* most challenging endeavor, attempted to dissuade him from undertaking what he thought was an unreachable goal and an impossible dream. He ridiculed *Yu Gong* that he was neither intelligent nor rational; with his advanced age and poor health, he could not even get rid of a blade of grass on the hill, and how he could remove those heavy rocks and soil from the two mountains.

Yu Gong replied, *Zhi Sou*, you are obstinate and inflexible. When I die, I have my children to carry out the task, then my grandchildren, and so on, generations after generations, and eventually his descendants would level the two mountains in the distant future. The mountains would never increase their heights. The Wise Old Man *Zhi Sou* was humbled by the reply of the Foolish Old Man *Yu Gong*.

The local mountain god² witnessed the entire hard work emanating from the Foolish Old Man's dream and went to Heaven to report to the Heavenly Emperor. The Heavenly Emperor was profoundly impressed by *Yu Gong's* determination, fortitude, tenacity, and endurance. Moved by the spirit of *Yu Gong*, the Heavenly Emperor summoned two mighty Angels to help remove the two mountains. From then on, the family of *Yu Gong* and the village community never had to negotiate the difficult route around the mountains.

²In the Chinese folklore, each house has a local god who lives with the family and observes what they are doing and would report to the Heavenly Emperor.



Xu Beihong's "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" was painted in India in 1940. Rabindranath Tagore invited him to India, so all of the models for the painting were Indian. Xu applied the forms of Western nudes to Chinese.

The second story is drawn from *Chandogya Upanishad*³ of the Sacred *Vedas* of India.

Uddalaka Aruni and Svetaketu and the Search for the Highest Truth

In ancient India, there was a practice that the father sent his grown-up son or a *shisha* to go to a *Gurukula* or a *Gurukulam* to study and learn. There he lives near or with a *Guro* a master, in the same house to learn and understand life. This first stage of education, is also known as the *Brahmacharya* stage, which takes some 12 years of formation, roughly from age 12 to 24. It is expected that after these years under a master, he can come home illuminated with a basic understanding of the world and reality.

A most inspiring example of this human pilgrim is an immortal story that has been told and retold for many ages. Quite interestingly, the story is found in a philosophical text of Indian civilization, namely the *Upanishad*.

³A philosophical part of the *Vedas*.

The inspirational passage is found in the famous dialogue between the father *Uddalaka Aruni* and his son *Svetaketu*.⁴

in the sixteen chapters of the sixth *Prapathaka* section of the *Chandogya Upanishad*.

Uddalaka Aruni was one of the earliest revealers of the *Upanishads*, who believed the knowledge of Self (Soul or Ego) to be the real knowledge. *Uddalaka Aruni* sent his son *Svetaketu* to the *Gurukulam*. When his son returned home after his 12 years of formal education, his father *Uddalaka Aruni* found him full of pride. *Uddalaka Aruni* was himself a respected *Rishi*, a wise man. He found his son arrogant and shallow and asked him;

“What, *Svetaketu*, is reality?” *Svetakeu* was speechless and asked his father, “What, indeed, father *Aruni*, is reality?”

Uddalaka Aruni said; Fetch me from thence a fruit of the *Nyagrodha* tree.

Svetaketu replied: “Here is one, Sir.”

“Break it.” Said the father.

“It is broken, Sir.”

“What do you see there?”

“These seeds, almost infinitesimal.”

“Break one of them.”

“It is broken, Sir.”

“What do you see there?”

“Not anything, Sir.”

The father *Aruni* replied to his son *Svetaketu*, “My son, that subtle essence which you do not perceive there, of that very essence this great *Nyagrodha* tree exists.” “Believe it, my son. That which is the subtle essence, in it all that exists has its Self. It is the True. It is the Self, “*Tat Tvam Asi, Svetaketu*”. “That thou art Sve-

⁴From the Twelfth *Khanda* of the *Chandogya Upanishad*. A story is a form of *Mahavakya*: A *mahabaya* is taken from the word *maha*, which means great, and *yakya* which means saying. In Vedanta philosophy, we find abundant great sayings and conversations of this kind.

taketu.” The importance of this human discovery of that which is permanent and unchanging.

*Mahavakya*⁵ in *Chandogya Upanishad* is a short text that discusses the nature of *Atman*, the self, the soul, or the psyche, and *Brahman*, the metaphysical reality and their oneness. A *Mahavakya* discusses the nature of knowledge and ignorance. With the help of a *Guro* and the practice of *Yoga* meditation, one is led to the realization of the deepest Self, *Atman*, the permanent and unchanging reality in one’s being. The dialogue between the father *Uddalaka Aruni* and his son *Svetaketu* is one such powerful teaching.

Uddalaka Aruni was determined to guide his son to the right knowledge of the Self and put him on the right path of knowledge.

Uddalaka Aruni instructed his son *Svetaketu*;

“Take a few crystals of salt and put them into a bowl of water, when you go sleep and bring it to me in the morning.” The next morning, the son took the bowl to his father.

The father said, “Dear son, take out the salt please.”

“Father, what do you mean? How is it possible to take out that salt?”

“All right, then just taste the water on the surface. How does it taste?”

“It is saltish and is bound to be so.”

“Take the water in the middle and at the bottom and tell me how it tastes.”

“That, too, is saltish and is bound to be so.”

“My dear child, do understand now that the Spirit I spoke of pervades all existence, like the salt in this water in the bowl. That is the Subtle Spirit. “That thou art, dear *Svetaketu*.”⁶

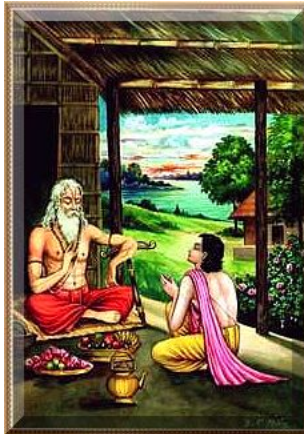
⁵*Mahavakya*, literally means great saying.

⁶*Chandogya Upanishad*.

In the end, *Svetaketu* overcame his ignorance and understood what true knowledge meant. It is common for parents to take more pride in the academic achievements of their children, but *Uddalaka Aruni*, a wise *Rishi* himself wanted his son to discover the inner Self instead of just understanding the art and science of rituals and scriptures. *Svetaketu* was born to a higher caste that needs a deeper understanding of reality, the understanding of his innermost being. The *Atman* in him. The unchanging spirit that makes his being.

The conversation of *Uddalaka Aruni* and *Svetaketu* contains a moral lesson for all Hindus that as parents they should take a greater interest in the spiritual foundation of their children.

In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, *Uddalaka Aruni* refers to the Highest Being as “That” or “That Being” instead of the usual reference as *Brahman*. According to *Uddalaka Aruni*, the Highest Being is eternal and without a beginning. The story of *Svetaketu* is a lesson on how to learn with humility in order to rise to the level of true understanding.



***Uddalaka Aruni* teaching *Svetaketu* the discovery of the highest knowledge, the unchanging SELF.**

Analysis and Conclusion

The “*The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains*” *Yu Gong Yi Shan* has drawn many aspects of Chinese civilization in the field of Arts and Literature, culture and history, as well as philosophy. As a literary piece, the narrative traverses generations and generations of writers since the time of the creator *Lie Zi* of the Classical Age to *Mao Zidong* the father of Modern China, *Lu Xun*, the father of Modern Chinese Literature, and many other artists *Xu Beihong*, *Zhang Lin*, *Zhang Huan*, and *He Yun Chang*. The message of the story conveys a Utopian high note in the potentiality of an old man moving a community and a civilization to move with perseverance, and audacity in order to transform what always seems impossible into possible, calling the powerful intervention of the mighty Heaven to intervene in human affairs. What is very palpable is that it has captured the Chinese imagination, to rally what sometimes seems to be absurd artwork evince the audacity of the artists, as well as the determination to participate in the grand project as a collective people and civilization aimed at changing a society that has the power to summon Heaven to intervene for its eventual triumph.

We see Chinese highly esteemed virtues of determination, perseverance, dedication, and hard work assure achievable goals and successes; where there’s a will, there’s a way; nothing is impossible for a willing heart; The Heavenly Emperor was moved by *Yu Gong’s* unyielding determination and perseverance; he compassionately assisted him to remove the mountains. “God helps those who help themselves” is a famed adage that accentuates the significance of self-initiative. This anecdote also exemplifies the traditional Chinese culture of emphasizing tenacity and hard work; particularly the Chinese from decades ago who often encountered many obstacles in their lives. Later generations would use the phrase “foolish old man” to stand for a strong-willed person who is not afraid of difficulties. “*The Foolish Old*

Man Who Removed the Mountains” is often used as a figure of speech for advancing despite hardship. The story examines a variety of insights into the human disposition of perseverance, audacity, and transformative power. Where seemingly absurd ideas can be carried out to fruition when people have the collective heart to push even a utopian vision aimed at changing society through symbolic interventions.

Meanwhile, the immortal conversation between the Sage *Uddalaka Aruni* and his son *Svetaketu* reminds us of the natural foolish disposition of a young man in his study of life. He was not originally motivated in the higher pursuit of wisdom for he was burdened by his material senses. As a consequence, all his years of schooling provided him with was a shallow understanding of the world. *Uddalaka Aruni* was not satisfied with his Son *Svetaketu* and taught him to rise to the level of transcendence. The movement from simple knowledge of the world to Wisdom in transcendence is the realization of the unchanging, permanent and eternal.

As human realize the phenomenon around him, he realizes that knowledge is limited and constricting driven by particular, while the search for wisdom rises to the level of what is apparent and what is beyond. Only the wise man is able to see what others are unable to see as he recognizes that the essence of reality is never really visible or manifested to his senses.

The insight of *Savetaketu* brought us the right to the very essence of ancient Indian wisdom that played a very significant role in the development of Indian Philosophy. The Indian prayer most powerfully captured this human longing for wisdom...

*From the untrue lead me to Truth,
From darkness lead me to Light,
From death lead me to Immortality.”*

My dear young Polish friends, I am sure, you have parents and teachers and great friends that have been instrumental in your intellectual development. As you enter the next level of your education, there will be more encounters that could powerfully touch your heart and your intellect to reach for things that rise from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from tangible to intangible, from this worldly to the transcendence, from the material to the immaterial, from confusion to illumination, all that will be powerful questions that would continue to reverberate in your inquiring minds, that, my dear young friends, is the journey of Philosophy. You are all welcome.

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Summary

This thought piece is taken from two legendary teachings created during the axial age in China and India. It was written to introduce to the Polish agenda of how to introduce young men in transition from pupil to the student of philosophy. The story from China exemplifies the traditional Chinese culture of emphasizing tenacity and hard work to introduce people to understand the phenomenon of life and to show how a man can overcome great obstacles in the world. The story examines a variety of insights into the human disposition of perseverance, audacity, and transformative power of man with determined heart. Where seemingly absurd ideas can be carried out to fruition when people have the collective heart to push even a utopian vision aimed at changing society through symbolic interventions from heaven. The second tale from India is taken from the immortal conversation between the father and his son extracted from the Vedic text of the Upanishad. The tale reminds us of the natural foolish disposition of a young student in his study of life. He learned, the importance of human discovery

of that which is permanent and unchanging and eternal. At the end, the young student realized that the trajectory of human pursuit of knowledge is to liberate himself from the drudgery of existence burdened by the sensible world. Such plight of a human pilgrim is aimed at his being taught to rise from the unreal to Real, from untrue to Truth, and from death to Immortality.

Keywords: curiosity, knowledge, understanding, Truth, Immortality, wisdom