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**A wisdom compass**

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**English  
podcast transcript**

# A wisdom compass to guide you!

An attempt at order by Aleida Assmann

English transcript

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*FM: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS project, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices at [www.metis.ethz.ch](http://www.metis.ethz.ch). What I've learned so far in recording our podcast series is that there are very different ways to gain wisdom. As diverse as our guests have been, so have their approaches. Even if there were always points of overlap, it doesn't seem so easy to put into words what wisdom ultimately is and how to attain it. Some people might think of their wise grandfather when they hear the word wisdom, while others think of their wise teacher. To some, a significant historical figure comes to mind, perhaps a politician or an activist. Others think of a particularly good movie or a poem that gave new perspectives. Today, I have the honor of speaking with renowned scholar of English and cultural studies Aleida Assmann. She has developed a compass to help us navigate the diverse landscape of wisdom traditions. At the end of our talk, we may know why so many different approaches can be united under the umbrella term 'wisdom' and whether there is a core idea that centers it all. Welcome, Aleida Assmann. It's nice to have you here today.*

*AA: Yes, a warm welcome from me as well. I look forward to our conversation.*

*FM: Mrs. Assmann, you have developed a compass of wisdom research. Can you briefly describe the poles of the compass and explain what this compass is for?*

AA: Yes, the first question is easy to answer. I have here in front of me the book that I was supposed to edit in 1990. And you can see it's quite thick. What I had in front of me was a great many manuscripts. Why? We organized three different wisdom conferences, two in 1987 and one in 1988, where a whole pile of manuscripts accumulated and I was tasked with putting them between two book covers. The title was simple: *Wisdom*. How to organize the table of contents, so to speak, was up to me. And that was a challenge because the material was incredibly heterogeneous. It covers very different cultures and times. The perspectives are very, very different. My task was to bring a bit of order and orientation into it. And that's actually something that I'm good at and that I really enjoy doing. I am a 'scientific housewife', so to speak, who first tidies things up a bit and then tries to bring everything in correct order. Here, there was this common denominator of the title, but otherwise great diversity, with some overlaps and family resemblance. That's why I came up with the idea of developing a compass, where you have four poles, and you don't have to reduce everything to one founding idea – and in this way you can express complexity without reducing it. You don't have to reduce everything to a single denominator. And with this four-fold diversity, I hoped to create a bit of orientation for the readers in this book.

*FM: Can you elaborate on the four poles? You have placed various literary or biblical figures at each of the four poles. Perhaps you could describe these briefly.*

AA: Yes. I'm an Anglicist, and Shakespeare is close to my heart, and that's why it wasn't difficult for me to get myself out of this difficulty with his help. I took three characters from Shakespeare, and added Solomon. Solomon comes from the Bible – *The Book of Proverbs*. Each of these names represents a different type of wisdom knowledge. And starting with Solomon – if I can just go through them briefly – we have the sovereign, judicial wisdom. Which brings us back to literature: *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, by Bertolt Brecht, is a story about two women fighting over a child. The child is supposed to be pulled out of this chalk circle by the stronger one. But the stronger one loses, because the weaker one is the more empathetic mother, and she gets the child. So that's an example of judicial wisdom. The other three types, as I mentioned, come from Shakespeare. And here we have Prospero. Prospero we know from *The Tempest*. He's the one who stores the knowledge of the whole

world, who has a lot of books and wants to know what holds the world together at its core; a magician, one could say, a Renaissance humanist or such. The next one is a completely different type: Polonius, the father of Laertes in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Polonius has the opportunity to give his son – who says goodbye to Paris at one point during the play and then leaves the castle – the most important rules of wisdom at his farewell. resulting in a considerable list of classical, fatherly wisdom rules. To help his son stay out of trouble in Paris, a dangerous place. But if he gets into an argument of any kind, he has to put up a good fight. He should not talk too much, rather listen. He should neither borrow nor lend. These are all very, very practical rules of life that should help him return safely. The fourth in the group is Jaques, from the play *As You Like it*. And this is the fool. The fool also has many, many guises in Shakespeare. In this case, it's a fool who is clearly connected to the biblical tradition; namely, to *Ecclesiastes* – again, the *Book of Proverbs*. And this is the wisdom book in which Vanitas is invoked. That is, the vanity of all knowledge and all life. And he does that by talking about the human life, and by comparing it to a play; a play in which we have our entrance and our exit. A play with seven acts, which are the seven ages of man: we come into the world, we develop, and we leave again. And in the end, it is really like this, man builds up and he breaks down again, in the end he has nothing left. He no longer has teeth, he can no longer taste, he can no longer see, he passes away, literally. And this – let's say very realistic but also pessimistic – conclusion and this summary of human life is simply based on this perspective of vanitas, of futility, which actually deprives people of their fundamental pride, for instance, to endure into all eternity.

*FM: I would like to go into these poles in more detail, but I have a question first: Shakespeare is known as a playwright and poet. He is mentioned here in the context of wisdom literature. Would you say that Shakespeare and wisdom go well together?*

AA: Well, Shakespeare is an author of whom a colleague once said that he invented us – us, humanity. Because in his dramas...and that's actually still true today; there are Netflix series that keep coming back to Shakespeare's plays, so he remains our contemporary in all new developments, globally...he is an author where humanity in all its diversity – or man in all his diversity – can recognize itself. But I would tweak the question: What is missing? Because something decisive is missing here. I have mentioned four male names: Solomon, Jaques,

Polonius and Prospero. The women are missing. The wisdom of the women is missing. One could think of *Macbeth* here, if we continue with Shakespeare. There are three women who appear at the beginning, three witches. And there's a man who gets advice from them. So there is something like an authority, a female authority for wisdom. And the interesting thing is that this authority for wisdom is being dismantled or replaced by male authorities, especially in the early modern period. At the universities for example: wisdom knowledge is monopolized or masculinized and the women are left behind; they are demonized to witches exactly in this time. So, there is also a cultural struggle around this phenomenon. And female knowledge is of course very, very strongly tied to the whole context of birth. The midwives are the ones who watch over the origin of life. But women are also the ones who stand in the kitchen and know the recipes. And to that extent, they are actually guardians of life. That wisdom has been largely lost; that is, the knowledge of that wisdom. And it's absolutely worthwhile to bring that back.

*FM: I find that a very exciting point, of course, because it's also... the two of us, two women, talking about wisdom here, today. Especially in relation to Macbeth, it occurs to me that on the one hand there's the wisdom of women as witches, which is then demonized in a certain sense; and then, of course, there's Lady Macbeth, who goes mad. So, this point of devaluing female wisdom is totally reinforced there.*

AA: Right, but you can also say that *King Lear* is such an example: it's also a drama about wisdom, but ex negativo. We get to know a king who is as unwise as possible. And in this respect, Shakespeare is not necessarily geared to ascribing wisdom only to men; he has also denied prominent figures wisdom, many of them male.

*FM: The compass that you created, seems to contain two extremes: We have this judicial figure and we have the fool. These are two very different forms of wisdom. On the one hand, we are dealing with a wisdom, referring to the fool, that perhaps takes a skeptical stance, in other words, alerts us to the fact that nothing remains and therefore should not be treated as if it were beyond all doubt, unshakable, as it were. On the other hand, we also have a judicial wisdom, which rather pronounces something like judgments. Where it is perhaps*

*nevertheless about a world knowledge that is as total as possible, to distinguish right and good. Isn't that very contradictory? How do you put that together?*

AA: You're absolutely right, there are considerable contradictions. And that is also the point of this compass. With the compass, I've already marked four orientations that all co-exist. We can't say, this goes south, then we can't use the north anymore, or so. That would be insane; we can't all go in one direction. And the quality of diversity is exactly what wisdom is all about. From a Western perspective – which we have to consider when we talk about wisdom; that's the one we're socialized in, culturally – we always think there's only one destination. So in the compass, we are north, so to speak. Then north is the only thing that remains of the compass. And that's not how it works with wisdom. The contradictions are systemic, they must stay. That is, you can't rationalize away one at the expense of the other. This rationalization serves an entirely different formation of knowledge. And that's why it's good that you underline that again: Yes, difference is important. And that's why I chose this figure.

*FM: In a nutshell, would you say that wisdom is more about producing knowledge or relativizing knowledge?*

AA: Well, I wouldn't call it producing knowledge, but rather passing on experiences. And that means experiences that have proven themselves. If we take the word 'prove' [*bewähren*], then there is an element in it that is also in the [*German*] word 'truth' [*Wahrheit*]. So truth is then what proves itself, what proves itself in practice, in observation, in meditation or wherever. And to hold this knowledge in a form that it can be handed down, but always in direct communication. So, it is not stored in books, in libraries, in archives, but it is always passed on in communication. That is the key: it is "embodied" knowledge.

*FM: So it's about preserving the tried and true. Isn't that then also a very conservative knowledge?*

AA: I would never use the word 'preserving'. The archive preserves and books preserve. All kinds of things are preserved. This is about passing on and re-actualizing what you have in a next act of communication.

*FM: So, wisdom is something totally alive.*

AA: Exactly, that's what I mean by "embodied".

*FM: And you're also making the case that there's something that runs through these traditions. Can you be more specific?*

AA: Well, if one is to generalize now, then I would say that wisdom knowledge – we can perhaps talk about this type of knowledge again in more detail – has a lot to do not only with the fact that it is embodied and always takes place in direct interactions, but also that it cannot be systematized. We have just tried to do that: Isn't there something that spans all of this? No, there isn't. It is also a knowledge that is not binary. That is, it can't be split into opposites, it can't be organized by a true-false dichotomy or a good-evil dichotomy. That doesn't work here. The structure is rather that of a paradox, or an 'ambiguous image'. We can talk about that later again in more detail; also, it's concrete and vivid, similar to metaphors. And that's also why, as a literary scholar – of course, dealing with literary texts – I feel somehow closer to this subject. It's an affinity thing.

*FM: You have mentioned the term 'ambiguous image'. You have also spoken of family resemblance, a concept that you find in Wittgenstein. In a family everyone somehow looks different, but many have a similar nose, or similar ears. Can you describe again how you combine the poles of a compass with the concept of family resemblance?*

AA: Yes, I would combine it in such a way that in all these manifestations that I present, I remain conscious that this is knowledge that is to clearly be distinguished from the knowledge with which I am socialized. I would say that I'm changing the vocabulary when I talk about wisdom. The vocabulary that I grew up with, within the culture that I live in, is a very different vocabulary. There it's about...take the concept of progress, for example, I

wouldn't find that at all in this wisdom complex. Rather, I would find the term 'balance' or 'equilibrium' – but not progress. I would not find the term acceleration, etc., either, but rather deceleration. I would find ideas like sustainability, which sound modern to us now, but which entered our vocabulary very late, as we know, because progress has left sustainability completely out of the equation. Or I would not find the word 'subject' there either. The relationship of people to their fellow people would take its place. It is actually a completely different grammar and a different vocabulary of knowledge that apply when dealing with wisdom texts. And its coherence and cohesiveness is only given to this complex when I juxtapose it with Western rationality.

*FM: Exactly. What I am hearing is that what wisdom literature has in common as a tradition, is that it totally counteracts the Western tradition, perhaps precisely in the sense of such semantics of progress. So that would be a bit of tradition versus tradition. At the same time, you also referred to Shakespeare, who is a big part of Western tradition. Do you only see opposition, or are there also points of overlap and parallels? Does it always have to be in contradiction, which sounds almost a bit like a fight that the two are waging?*

AA: They're not fighting because wisdom doesn't have any matadors to defend it. So, when I wrote this book, it had little consequence. It's a reminder of what Western rationality has blocked out. Shakespeare wrote in the 1600s, in early modernity. What Shakespeare doesn't have at all is a strong concept of the subject, which later totally dominates our philosophy. The subject as such is only invented after Shakespeare. There is Hamlet, who comes from Wittenberg – there is something German about him – and who always reflects on himself and has a deep inner life and such. Hamlet thinks about authenticity – very modern – but he is not at the core of our Western rationality. That only developed during the Enlightenment and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And that's why Shakespeare is much closer to the wisdom complex than we are today. I think this is an important juxtaposition - I don't want to dramatically dichotomize it, because that would be very unwise; but I would like to say: it's the whole complex that was excluded from Western rationality and was forgotten. And that's why this is a one-sided affair. With the help of this knowledge, I can appropriate a little bit of what we have thrown overboard. And this includes knowledge of finiteness [Endlichkeitswissen] – you can't call it a negative anthropology, because that is based on the premise that man is



fundamentally evil, and that is not the basis here at all, but rather that man is fundamentally weak, I would say, is the image of man of wisdom. And that's why you have to reckon with the recurring vices and bad habits of man. These vices include greed, stinginess and violence. Every human being has these – and Shakespeare knew that, which is why he wrote so much about it. These are things that always go in the direction of diminishing the ego. So, the wisdom concept went in the direction of self-domestication of man. That's quite different from the idea that was developed in the West during colonialism, for example, that the "savages" are not civilized and we have to civilize them. The counter-model is not the theory of the inequality of people and we make them better with our culture, or religion, but rather the idea that we all have these weaknesses, and that we need to get a grip on ourselves and domesticate ourselves, especially knowing that this danger lies within us all.

*FM: The three vices you mentioned all relate very much to an ego, to an ego that wants to impose its will. You also deal a lot with the concept of communality beyond your research. Were you able to draw from your wisdom research for that as well?*

AA: Yes, exactly. So that has already struck me as an important strand of the occidental tradition, but especially also of the modern worldview. The strong masculine imprint of the adventurer who sets out, takes a risk, and changes the world, so to speak. That is what this culture is all about; it has circumnavigated the entire world with incredible success and has also spread its technologies across the world. The basic attitude of wisdom would be to hold back on this kind of certainty – not based on certainties, but perhaps rather on uncertainties. And that's more about skepticism, openness, and something like navigating the uncertain. We don't actually have these certainties that we pretend to have. That's the reminder, so to speak, with which wisdom literature confronts us again and again.

*FM: If I may ask again, critically: You referred to Shakespeare, who is the national poet, author, of England. And England is a country that is very much involved in the colonialist game that you have just mentioned. How can Shakespeare be so important for England, although it committed all these atrocities for which it is now more or less trying to apologize?*

AA: Well, Shakespeare may not have written at the height of colonialism. That happened a little later, after all. But he was anticipating that history. And if I cite a wisdom compass here again, it's Prospero, who is actually in a colonization situation: he comes to this island, he's banished, that is, he doesn't want to go there at all, he's deported, so to speak. On this island, there is also a representative of the indigenous people, Caliban. His mother, the female wisdom on this island, Sycorax, is also a witch. He's already playing out all of these structures, but not in a way where he's reforming us, the type of successful colonizer. If that were the case, we would probably hardly read him today. And then, above all, he would not be adaptable. After all, Shakespeare is an author who is incredibly adaptable, so that he can be staged and rewritten over and over again. He is in a way graspable because he has scattered such incredibly creative material – or sparks that are still glowing today and are always being rekindled.

*FM: We spoke about the fact that wisdom should actually be something quite alive. In other words, it is intrinsic to wisdom that it remains communicable and that we can exchange ideas about it, and that it is not knowledge for the archives. So, it's a matter of updating the tradition that we already have, for example Shakespeare, Molière, perhaps Goethe?*

AA: Quite right, which brings us back to literature. That's the perspective from which I'm looking at wisdom – literature offers you possibilities to reactivate this knowledge again and again and to adapt it to the time in which we live. It's probably possible with philosophical texts in some way, but there's a much stronger tradition of respecting the text and commenting on it and making old texts understandable again and again. When they come on stage, the situation is completely different: There you have a stronger availability, but also a stronger objection of the present, or the right of the present to have a say, so that they are kept alive in a different way.

*FM: That reminds me of theater productions. How can research help to keep such a tradition alive or perhaps even revive it?*

AA: Yes, we are currently working on a project here, with this METIS portal and the Wisdom Podcast. I think that's a form of relaying this knowledge that we're acquiring and that we want to reconstruct and reactivate. That's exciting in the present. And we are also doing something similar at the University of Constance with our 'Gemeinsinn-Projekt', where we have discovered, in fact, that there are large, let's say, gaps, or also barriers in Western rationality and the very philosophically influenced image a single subject that confronts some object and somehow takes hold of it. In general, the whole Western tradition, which for 500 years has been strongly narrowed down in a certain direction, has to be ruffled up. That's what we're experiencing. And we have to deal with this: "There's a crack in everything, that's where the light gets in" – well, if there is such a crack, then other streams of knowledge come back. And with the wisdom theme, we are at a point where we can say: this is something that is ubiquitous. It's not universal, it's ubiquitous. That's very important to me, the difference. Universal is sort of a principle: for all I care, the Kantian categorical imperative, which says: "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law." And then this sentence is exported to the whole world with the remark: this comes from Mr. Kant, so please accept this. Wisdom works differently. There is a golden rule that is very simple. Every child has heard it before. You pick it up on the street, so to speak: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you." Every child can understand it. And this content is handed down in all religions. It's in the so-called Old Testament, in the Hebrew Bible, and several times in the New Testament. But it also exists in the Koran, it exists in all religions of the world. And that's what I call ubiquitous: it is local in traditions everywhere. And to that extent, I would say – now we come back to the family resemblance – wisdom has the chance to transmit a knowledge that preserves this family resemblance with other cultures. Whereas, we can say, Western culture has stopped doing that. And that's the big project, to do something different. This has become the *Sonderweg* of Europe. But if we move abandon the "special path" and get back in touch with other cultures, we can do that very well with this concept of wisdom.

*FM: So the categorical imperative would be something like an export product, as in "one size fits all", that everyone has to accept, while what you described with the golden rule is perhaps something that has popped up in different variations in different places, and is*

*something that connects cultures, where one can refer to it again, in order to revive connections – even after periods of colonialism, for example. So, it becomes something very political, which you perhaps have in mind in terms of wisdom?*

AA: Exactly. You've described it very beautifully: It's really a matter of moving from a great asymmetry, with which Europe – or the West – has brought itself to the rest of the world, back into a new form of behavior, and also actually coming back to the family resemblances that are, after all, ingrained somewhere in all cultures. And to remember that, I think, is a good basis for saying that there are values that we share, that we have in common, and that we then also pass on and re-establish for a common future.

*FM: So far, we've been talking about a philosophical subject in a very abstract way. Perhaps you could be a bit more specific. What do you see as problematic in the present, where you think wisdom literature can help us?*

AA: Well, one point, for example, is the image of man: when I speak of the subject, of subject philosophy, I think of the fact that we are trained to think of the subject as autonomous and free-standing. There's a good sense in that; you want to give the subject as much freedom as possible. That's sort of the positive heritage that we want to preserve here with the idea of autonomy. On the other hand, we fail to recognize the many relationships in which people are involved, which are actually part of life. And the problem is that if you cut off all this and misjudge and forget it, that leads to very strange deformations. And these deformations of the self-image – that is, of man as a free-standing subject – are also counteracted by our understanding of public spirit, for example, where we assume that man can actually only exist in interaction with other people. He is dependent on others, if you think again of the seven ages of man, at the beginning and at the end of course, he is always harnessed, and he actually thrives because he exists in a group. And not to forget that Jewish philosophers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also tried to make this clear, for example Buber in *I and Thou* or Löwith, who wrote *Das Individuum in der Rolle des Mitmenschen*. To take on a visible role. As humans, we take on roles. And these roles differ depending on who we are dealing with. But it's always about interacting with another human being. So, the role of a subject or a closed-off monad is completely unrealistic. And

this return to everyday life that has largely been neglected in philosophy, this return becomes possible with such wisdom texts, which I believe is inherent in the philosophers who have turned against the German subject philosophy obsession.

*FM: So if I understand you correctly, you believe that autonomy is in a certain way also an achievement of the Enlightenment, which we should not lose, but perhaps connect, in a new way, with an even older tradition, to arrive at a better form of cohabitation?*

AA: Exactly. It's about avoiding one-sidedness. And sometimes you can only achieve goals by forgetting or leaving out other things. And once you have some experience, then you can make improvements and adapt the models when needed. And if you want to do that and say that there's a need for correction of the current Western view of man and so on, then you can fall back on these resources. And that's why it's so important that we talk about this and learn about other approaches.

*FM: In conclusion, I would like to ask you a very specific question: How can wisdom literature contribute to bringing people closer together? Can you give examples of the successful application of texts?*

AA: Well, maybe I'll just do that by going back to what we started with – the wisdom compass. And if you look at it again, think about it now, how can it be used besides helping me structure a book? Can we also learn something from it for the present or the future? First of all, the fact that we don't just have one basic idea – like the subject – but that we think in different directions and don't always juxtapose, which, despite making things more systemizable, also leads to blind spots. And at the moment, we are in a situation where we say: The Enlightenment was great, but it has produced massive blind spots. And that's why we have to go back to the compass: You could say that Solomon's type is still needed for a form of government that creates balance, that recognizes inequalities, and creates balance; in this case, always protects the weak against the strong – today, you could also say the poor against the rich. Counteraction is required. And exactly this counteraction is contained in Solomon, if he is chosen as a leading figure. If the other two – Prospero is the one who wants to know everything, still has, so to speak, holistic knowledge in mind, wants to

understand what holds the world together in its innermost, similar to Goethe later on – well, that's a basic figure that also connects many, but which is probably also directed a bit more inward; so enlightenment, or self-conquest, you can include everything there. Then with Prospero, with the practical rules of life: How can you make a society more people-friendly and in its communities, which are now becoming very diverse and where quite a lot of heterogeneous people come together in a very small space; how can you rekindle this concept of public spirit, so that you have ideas about how you can make this cohabitation fairer and more integrative? That could be linked to Polonius. And finally, Jaques, the skeptic, who would remind us that we as human beings are finite, that we must not develop delusions of grandeur, that we should consider the consequences of our actions, and that we should become more modest overall.

*FM: Great, I think I understand now. We were talking about the different directions, and your compass really helps to counteract the fact that one perhaps goes too strongly in one direction, and that it's important to course correct. So, your project is really about this balancing of forces, right?*

AA: Exactly.

*FM: Exactly. Yes, that brings us to the end of our conversation. Thank you very much, Aleida Assmann.*

AA: Yes, thank you very much for the interview. I enjoyed it very much.

*FM: This podcast was produced by Martin Münnich, with support from ETH Zurich and the Udo Keller Foundation Forum Humanum in Hamburg. I would like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks and to explore the media offerings on the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices at [www.metis.ethz.ch](http://www.metis.ethz.ch), for example by following the link below to access the booklets to the podcast. Thank you for your time and and goodbye.*