



# AIT

## Asian Institute of Technology

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### **FROM THE GROVES OF ACADEME TO THE WORLD OF REALITY**

Let me, on this happy occasion, when a prestigious degree is conferred upon you by a prestigious international academic institution, congratulate you for your achievement which you doubtless deserve. You have spent, perhaps, the best years of your life on this campus where you met teachers and peers from different parts of the world, who enriched your life in more ways than one.

Today is thus a landmark, a turning point, in your life. As you leave the groves of Academe, you will enter the world of reality, a world full of challenges. Your success or failure to face these challenges depends partly on the knowledge and experience that you gained at this Institute. Let me wish you moral strength to face these challenges for your own good and for the good of the many.

At this very moment when we are gathered here, in this convocation hall, in a solemn atmosphere, innumerable things are happening across the globe. Two of these things capture my attention: one of them nearer home, the other far away in the Indian state of Gujarat.

The scene nearer home is the result of fires of human desire, fires that reduced to ashes years of human endeavor, fires that made the city of smiles cry in shame. It's a scene that exhibits the working of the human mind at its worst, arousing base instincts like anger, animosity, hatred and ill-will.

The scene in India is quite different: a long-haired and bearded old man in his eighties is sealed in a hospital in the city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat in a study initiated by the Defence Research and Development Organization of India, the state defence and military research institute. He is under constant observation by a team of 30 medics equipped with cameras and closed circuit television.

What made the research team keep this old man under surveillance for about two weeks now is the fact that he has spent seven decades of his life without any food or water. A neurologist is reported to have said "We still don't know how he survives. It is still a mystery what kind of phenomenon this is"

The medics and scientists may not know but the old man knows. Prahlad Jani, a yogi who practices meditation, seems to know what he is doing. He seems to have gained the control of his body by the power of his mind, by extinguishing fires of human desire. Having extinguished his fires of desire, the old man lives in peace and tranquility. He is poor but happy.

What conclusions can we draw from these two disparate incidents? Do they have anything in common at all? In my view, there is. They display two facets of the same phenomenon: the workings of the human mind. They open new areas for future academic investigation which is our basic concern. Let me place before you some of the conclusions that I have drawn from these two scenes.

First: that we need knowledge for survival. With the dawn of the new millennium, we have entered the so-called 'knowledge society' where knowledge, rather than money, is the most essential capital. Lack of knowledge or ignorance will not take us anywhere. Ignorance will only make you grope blindly in the dark.

The medics and their team at the Gujarat defence and military institute had knowledge to conduct the investigation at the hospital. They knew what they were looking for, and they had the right equipment, such as camera and closed circuit television to get the necessary information. Without such medical and technological knowledge they would not be able to conduct this study.

Knowledge is one of the things that you too acquired here at the AIT. You entered the portals of this campus with a considerable body of knowledge and today you are leaving it more knowledgeable than when you entered it a few years ago. Knowledge is the foundation on which everything else is built.

Second: that knowledge expands. Universities and academic institutes like the AIT, not only impart knowledge that is already there but create new knowledge, thereby extending the horizons of knowledge. With your teachers and peers you worked hard to add new knowledge to the corpus of knowledge that already existed.

To create new knowledge, you need intelligence. You used your intelligence to question, argue, compare, contrast, speculate and to conclude. Thus you arrived at logical conclusions, transforming your hypotheses into new theories, thus extending the horizons of knowledge.

Third: that knowledge has its own limits. Having observed the old man for a period of two weeks the specialists had to confess "We still do not know how he survives". That clearly shows that what we know is limited. There is so much more to be discovered, particularly in the area that deals with the workings of the mind.

Fourth: that knowledge can also be abused. The acquisition of knowledge is one thing. The use of knowledge is another thing. The abuse of knowledge is quite a different thing. The knowledge that you have acquired in Management, Environment or IT can not only be used but also be abused.

He who uses his knowledge of IT, for instance, to create 'viruses', to distort facts and figures, to destroy what we have built over generations is, in reality, abusing his knowledge for the sake of private gain over public interest. IT experts are now engaged in seeking new laws to crush these abuses.

Knowledge is thus a tool that must be handled with care, for it can either be used to make our life easier, more comfortable and more efficient or can be abused to make life difficult, more uncomfortable and disastrous. The choice of using or abusing knowledge is entirely ours.

Fifth: if knowledge can also be abused, then we need something more powerful than knowledge to monitor its workings. Is there anything above knowledge? I think there is. There is 'wisdom', the quality of being wise. It is true that academic courses in universities and institutes give you knowledge; make you more and more knowledgeable, but do they make you any wiser?

What exactly is 'wisdom'? Wisdom is something that has to do with what is right and what is wrong; what is moral and what is immoral; what is ethical and what is unethical. The binary distinction between 'right' and 'wrong' does not always justify the binary distinction between 'legal' and 'illegal'. What is 'legal' may not always be 'right'.

On a happy day like today, I do not want to strike a discordant note. But as a man of grey hair, I do not want to mislead you by drawing too rosy a picture of the world of reality that you will soon face. It is a world full of desires and disasters. Most of the disasters you will face today are due either to the lack of knowledge or the abuse of knowledge.

Of course, there are some disasters that may be called 'natural'. Storms, tsunamis, cyclones, typhoons, earthquakes and the like are natural disasters that are beyond human control. However, thanks to advances in knowledge, we are today more prepared than ever before to face such natural disasters.

Teams of researchers at the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre in Bangkok, for example, are conducting research into new ways and means of getting information in advance about impending natural disasters. New machines have been created, new programmes have been designed to record this information.

All the other disasters are man-made. Drought appears to be a natural disaster but isn't it triggered off by human desires? Isn't it the logical culmination of acts of deforestation engineered by human beings who seek personal monetary gains at the expense of the public good? Is global warming a purely natural disaster?

The worst of the disasters are purely man-made. Terrorism, communalism, religious fanaticism, civil war, pollution, poverty, inflation, bankruptcy, epidemics, diseases such as AIDS-HIV, drug addiction, child abuse, human trafficking and so on are caused by human beings either due to their lack of knowledge or their abuse of knowledge.

Whenever there is a lack of knowledge, use the knowledge you have gained to educate the people. Whenever there is an abuse of knowledge, use your wisdom to tell them that there are many things more valuable than money, power, fame and glory. Tell them that there are values called 'moral values' or 'ethical values'.

Moral or ethical values are neither Buddhist nor Christian; neither Hindu nor Islamic. They are neither Eastern nor Western.; They are not the sole property of any religion, of any culture, of any community or of any nation . They are human values of universal validity. Men of wisdom

brought them down from generation to generation to make life on this planet peaceful and comfortable.

These values make the human animal different from other beasts; make human beings share the resources of the world in a just and fair manner; make human beings realize that there are things more important than money and profit; make human beings realize that even animals need our love; make human beings understand that our natural environment needs our care.

In this way, use your knowledge and wisdom to make this world a better place to live, a place where all beings, whether human or animal, can coexist in peace, harmony and dignity. You are the leaders of the future. The future of your country is in your hands. Make the Asian Institute of Technology feel proud of you.

Thank you.  
Khap kun krap!