Vikramaditya and the Art of Being
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Compare and contrast an event/movie/activity to one or more books or one or more concepts in the books. This assignment was completed for Dr. Leslie Heaphy & Dr. Keith Lloyd’s Great Books to 1700.

Looking at Indian culture through the perspective of the book, Thirty-Two Tales from the Throne of Vikramaditya, we see traditions that can be reflected in many areas of life. For the most part, readers only see the life of a king and the brahmins that he comes into contact with. However, the themes in the book reach beyond a single social position or trade. The Hindu culture reflects a belief system that reaches a much broader scope, so that the same behavior that is admired in a king might also be seen in the way others conduct their daily business. If they are in line with Hindu beliefs, then they are working towards the same goal no matter what their trade.

In the documentary film, Ayurveda: The Art of Being, we see another side of Indian culture, one that has lasted through the centuries. The film follows the Ayurvedic practices of several Indian gurus and scholars as they put to use knowledge that has been around since probably before 3,000 BC. Some say that the word Ayurveda means “the science of life” ("About the Ayurvedic Institute"), and others explain it to mean “the wisdom of life” or the “knowledge of longevity” ("Introduction to Ayurveda"). While these translations describe it well enough, they do not quite capture the full idea. Ayurveda is fascinating because it does not attempt to separate the physical illness from the patient’s mental state. It combines science and philosophy in a way that makes more sense than modern medicine would want to admit. One of the main advantages to learning about it through this documentary is that it interviews real people in India who seem to truly understand the practices. It is not just a “practice” to them; it is a way of life. As it says in the title of the film, Ayurveda is “the art of being” (Nalin).

One important aspect of this culture is the idea that everything is made up of one whole. Everyone is a part of a single consciousness, or unity. This is significant in relation to the book because it explains why Vikramaditya displayed such self-sacrificing behavior. One place where this is clearly acknowledged rather than just being acted out is when it is stated, “for the large hearted, the world itself is one family” (Dvātriṃśikā 49). If you are part of the same unity that your neighbor is part of, then helping them is the same as helping yourself ("Hindu Ethics"). This is also the mindset that some of the Gurus in the film have. One man says that health for a specific person, health for an animal, health for society, and health for the entire planet “is not something different.” Everything is part
of the “natural rhythm.” The individual is the whole. The whole is the individual.

A reoccurring theme in Thirty-Two Tales is the importance of acquiring knowledge. This is also relevant in the documentary, since a healer obviously has to learn quite a bit about his trade before he can heal anyone. There are several similarities between the book and the film in the methods and the nature of learning. In a few of the stories the king leaves his kingdom in the hands of his ministers so that he can be free to roam throughout the country in disguise. To us, it might seem strange that Vikram feels that he has to travel in order to learn new things, especially since he is king and probably has many resources available to him, but it is more understandable considering their culture. Some of it has to do with the fact that these tales take place during a time period when things had to be done differently, but that is not the only reason.

When reading, you come across many sayings and maxims that fill up almost half of the book. These are often preceded by the words “It is said” and followed by “and similarly.” In these cases, characters in the story are repeating cultural teachings that have probably been ingrained in them from a young age. At first it might seem like the author incorporated these pieces of philosophy for the sake of literary flourish, but the film shows us differently. From time to time the gurus will recite something to the interviewer. When this happens it is so natural that it just blends in to the rest of their speech.

This is how they learn and retain much of what they know. One man explains that “there are lessons in the form of poetry,” and he even goes so far as to say that trying to learn in a different way is not proper and could be considered “stealing” (Nalin).

The film makes it clear that, though people can try to learn through reading, they cannot truly understand unless they have been instructed, in person, by a guru. Many of the concepts, especially in medicine, are too difficult to grasp without a lengthy apprenticeship ("About the Ayurvedic Institute"). The basic idea that can be drawn from this is that it is experience, not books, that makes someone knowledgeable. That is why Vikram feels the need to travel. If he hears about something happening far away, he goes there himself to verify if it is true. The reason that he gives for wanting to do this is that he wants to “see various kinds of marvels, to gain knowledge of the differences between good and wicked people, and to understand oneself” (Dvātrīṃśikā 85). This is a much deeper sort of knowledge than the word usually implies. As one of the experienced gurus in the documentary confidently states, “He who knows his true self and nature is the greatest person of all” (Nalin). The word “great” here is used previously to refer to important figures. It implies accomplishment, the kind that cannot be learned from a book.

The application of knowledge also goes much deeper than in some other cultures because it is inextricably
connected to the philosophy of unity that was discussed above. We see over and over again in the book that Vikramaditya uses what he knows to help people at every opportunity, in the same way the gurus in the documentary exhibit a humble and generous attitude towards their patients. Most importantly, it is emphasized that nothing should be done for personal gain. The book tells of the transience of wealth as opposed to the lasting reward of doing good things. It compares the nature of wealth to “a lamp’s flame flickering in a gusty wind.” (Dvātrimśikā 52) The gurus in the film go even further by showing an obvious contempt for money. One of them asks, “Why should I go and do anything for the sake of money?” Another one explains that he had been taught that, if wealth comes from the suffering of others, it is contaminated. (Nalin) These people have a very peaceful attitude toward life. They are not concerned with elevating their own position, and they use what they do have to help others, just like the legend of Vikramaditya.

At one point in the film there is an old man speaking of how he has embraced the end, whenever fate decides to take him. Others around him try to assure him that he could reasonably live ten more years, but he protests that possibility by saying, “Enough is enough” (Nalin). This idea of living a full life and being okay with the fact that it is coming to a close is also seen in the book. It says that people only fear death because they have not done what they are supposed to do, and that if they did, they would “await the arrival of death like that of a friend” (Dvātrimśikā 87). This view tells a lot about the nature of this culture. Knowledge is not acquired for the sake of knowledge, and wealth is not acquired for the sake of wealth. Everything is supposed to be done for the good of all. Those who can truthfully say that they have lived this out are the ones who seem to be most content with life. You could say that they have mastered the “art of being.”

Works Cited


"Introduction to Ayurveda." Banyan Botanicals. Web. 18 Nov. 2015