A little horse approaches the river. The river has swollen due to the recent rains. White waters run foaming with the currents. There is no bridge. The little horse is about to step into the water.

Stop!

(Toastmaster, My dear toastmasters)

Stop! Shouts the panicked squirrel. The squirrel says; "Do not go into that water. It is too dangerous. I lost a friend to this river". The little horse listens to this advice and turns to go back home. Now he sees a bull. The little horse asks the bull if it is safe to cross the river. The bull replies; “It is nothing, only my legs get wet. I cross this river all the time".

Let us pause the story of the little horse and look at our own lives.

In our lives we get advices from various people. Sometimes when we ask for them. Sometimes without invitation. Most of the time they do it with a benevolent intent.

Asking for advice is all well and good if your question was something like, what is 2 plus 2. Because the question is objective and the answer will also be objective. But if the question is subjective, the reliability of the advices decline rapidly. More subjective the question is, more unreliable the answer. A question like “should I take this subject or that” might get a fairly consistent answer if you ask your batch mates or seniors while a question like “Should I ask her out?” would get a plethora of different answers. The problem is in the fact that the questions we have are unique to the situation.

Most of the advice that you get without asking are what Socrates was describing when he said; “Everyone tells you what to do and what’s good for you. They don’t want you to find your own answers. They want you to believe theirs.” These are the advises you get because the person giving advice saw that you are going in a direction that is not compatible with his or her set of beliefs.

The eco-system of produces and consumers is a perilous ground for taking advice. Sometimes the customers are more ill-informed than the seller about their own needs. So most market surveys are doomed to fail. That is what Henry Ford was referring to when he said; “If I asked my customers what they want, they would have asked for a faster horse”. The other side of this argument, where the produces advise consumers to buy things, is not without fault either. That is the origin of the phrase; “Oh marketing! It makes us buy things we do not need, with the money that we do not have, to impress people that we do not like”

The Confused little horse from the story, ran back to his mother. The mother listened to the story and said; "You are not as big as the bull but you are not as small as the squirrel. So look at their stories and look at their sizes and decide what is good for you." So the yearling ran back to the river and looked at the bull and looked at the squirrel and thought about what they said. Finally he carefully took a step into the water. And another, and another. It was not as easy as the bull said. But it was not as deadly as the squirrel said either. He successfully crossed to the other side.

This story tells us how to use other people’s advice. It is a simple three part process. First part is internalizing. The great Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart held the belief that music is not in the notes but in the silence in between. A very peculiar belief to have for a musician, one might say. But it is not as strange as you might think. Say there were no gaps between notes. Then all you will hear would be an endless calamity of noise. It is in the silence between the notes that we take in what we heard and internalize it. Similarly you need to listen to what others say and internalize it. Give it some time. Make it yours.
Second part is comparing your abilities. The bird who sits on a small branch does not put its faith in the strength of the branch and in the hope that it will not break by its weight. It puts its faith in its own ability to take flight *if* the branch fails. Take the internalized advice and compare and contrast with what your abilities are. Others will give advice according to their experience. But you know who you are and what you can do.

Thirdly, reflect. Give a moment to silence. Listen to the silence. Because when you listen to the silence, the only voice your mind hear is the voice of your heart. To the troubled mind there is no voice sweeter than that.

Use that knowledge to build a path of your own and execute it. Do not follow something because someone told it to you. Be it an elder, be it a friend. Do not take advice because you read it in a book. Do not take advice because the leader of the philosophy you follow is alleged to have said that. Take advice when it agrees with your reason and common sense. That is one thing I read in Buddhist literature, I internalized, compared against my abilities, reflected and finally have come to accept.

Remember the process; Internalize, compare, and reflect. Internalize, compare, and reflect.

Now that I have given you advice on how to take advice, take a moment and listen to the *whisper* silence.

(Over to you toastmaster)