

# Thinking about Morality through Asian Religions

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*What is the nature of and solution to evil? Where does it “come from”? What generates it? Can it be solved? Does it need to be solved? If “yes,” then how? If “no,” then how do we “live” with it?*

## I. “The Buddha” and His “Awakening”

### **Textbook Readings:**

Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions*, pp. 82–112

Philip Novak, ed., *The World’s Wisdom*, ch. 2: §§ 1–12; 16–22



Hinduism (which you have studied previously in this course) has a special concern with order in the community. It accepts the ascetics who withdraw from normal society. But even then, it finds a way to make them a part of the social order. But Buddhism raises a very important question. Are the goals of an ordered society really important? Communities have rules because they want people to get along. Then everyone can be “happy.” But is happiness good? Is it a goal worth pursuing?

Buddhism says “no.” Happiness depends on desire. I want this person to like me, I want to get into a special college, or get that job, or get married. If I obtain these goals, then I will be “happy.” If I don’t get what I want, I feel unhappy. I might even become depressed or angry. Life’s disappointments lead to pain and suffering.

Buddhism provides a solution to suffering. The solution is inside each of us. Suffering is not caused by gods or devils. So we shouldn’t waste time asking them to help us. Suffering is not caused by the outside world. So we shouldn’t waste energy trying to change the world.

Suffering is caused by our own desires. If I can stop my desires — for money, sex, pleasure, or “fulfillment” — then I can stop suffering. According to one form of Buddhism, we ought to withdraw from everyday life, and stop our desires.

The ideal life is one of disciplined concentration as a monk. As we learn to control our thoughts, feelings, and innermost attitudes, we can stop all desire. As we stop desire, we gain — not happiness — but complete tranquility: peace of body, thoughts, and spirit.

For some Buddhists, this tranquility could be found in everyday life. For all Buddhists, agreed that true happiness was found in letting go of desires and ambition. Life is “emptiness.” Life has no ultimate purpose or meaning. There is no “real self” that we need to find.

The sooner we accept that this is the way reality is, the sooner we will find inner peace. This is the peace of “enlightenment.”

### 1. The Loss of Indian Community

Around 600 B.C.E., India was going through a period of radical change. The old agricultural way of life was becoming more and more urbanized. Farmers and people who herded cattle for a living were being replaced by businessmen and traders.

The community, protection, and care of the clans and tribes was giving way to impersonal cities. A young person seeking his or her own way in life could easily get lost — physically, socially, and spiritually.

With the loss of tribal belonging went a loss of tribal rules and morality. How did a person act in such a cold and uncaring environment? Freedom brought moral chaos. A person could get away with a lot of injustice. People needed new moral guidelines in the midst of this chaos.

Because of the increase in business, more people became wealthy and could afford lives of ease and pleasure. But many people discovered, then as now, that pleasure did not answer life's fundamental questions or meet its deepest needs. If pleasure and satisfaction of the senses could not answer life's questions, then perhaps *denial* of pleasure could make one happy.

**Question:** *Do people have a **right** to be happy? Why or why not? If we do have a right to be happy, then why is it so hard? (Does the Declaration of Independence—men “are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights...[including the right to] the pursuit of happiness”—apply here?)*

## 2. The Buddha, the Four Sights

As we saw in “The Loss of Indian Community,” India went through a rapid period of change and moral questioning about 2500 or 2600 years ago. It seemed that there were two basic alternatives to this crisis of character: surrender to pleasure, or total denial of pleasure.

Many of the *nouveau riche* (“new rich” — businessmen who had made a lot of money in the changing society) chose pleasure. In different ways, the Upanishads, the Jains, and other religious and moral people chose its opposite: denial of pleasure, extreme asceticism.

But asceticism did not always seem to work either. After all, the logical end of asceticism (as expressed in Jainism), was to do nothing, be nothing, to simply allow one's self to die rather than to harm others.

Is this really the way to good character? Doesn't this answer run away from the problem of our responsibility to the rest of life instead than facing it? Was there a path inbetween the extremes of complete pleasure and total self? The Buddha was a teacher who believed he had discovered the “middle way.”

The Buddha began his life as prince named **Siddhartha Gautama**.<sup>1</sup> His early life was pampered and sheltered. According to traditional stories told later, his father did his best to shield Siddhartha from the facts of suffering, pain, disease, and death.

Once (according to these stories) when Siddhartha wanted to take a journey out to the forest, his father removed all the beggars, sick, and physically maimed people from the side of the road. But the gods made sure that Siddhartha saw three men, each representing a stage of suffering in life: old age, disease, death.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Gautama” was his family name and meant “of the lineage of Gotama.” “Siddhartha” would be his “first name” (like Frank or Robert).

<sup>2</sup> See *The World's Wisdom*, ed., Novak [the anthology in this course], §§4–7.

For him, these were new realities. As he thought about them, he became more and more restless. Finally he decided to leave his comfortable life, his wife and daughter. He would discover the truth about life, and find answers to human suffering.

Gratification of the senses only brought restlessness and emptiness. The more one had, the more one wanted. The more one wanted, the more one felt disappointed by the things one had.

To solve this problem, he tried the way of extreme **asceticism**. He copied the lives of wandering pious men, who had no family, home, or money. These wandering ascetics (called *sramanas*) might have possessed a single tattered and dirty garment. Like a devoted Jaini monk, he was even willing to starve himself. (Old, disease, death, and asceticism are collectively known as the **four sights**.)

But it brought him no nearer to a solution of human suffering. Starvation also created restlessness and emptiness (an empty stomach, among other things!). So what was he to do? Siddhartha continued to meditate on his situation. He realized that inner peace did not come from an empty stomach.

True calm is properly obtained by the constant satisfaction of the senses. The mind's self-possession is only obtained when the senses are perfectly satisfied. True meditation is produced in one whose mind is self-possessed and at rest.<sup>3</sup>

By "constant satisfaction of the senses," Siddhartha did not mean having anything one wanted (food, sex, excitement, etc.). He meant that the senses were satisfied with what they received. One didn't desire more pleasure than one had. One didn't rebel against the pain one experienced. One was "at rest."

Inner peace — calm and serenity — is obtained through acceptance of the moment. The mind is in control of itself. Pleasure does not make one restless for more. One simply accepts what one experiences at the moment.

In the same way, pain doesn't really hurt if one simply accepts it. It comes and goes. The mind knows it is only temporary and will go just like it came. Suffering happens when one *focuses* on the pain, when one identifies it — "this hurts!" Then one begins to reject it, get angry at it. The sufferer wants to strike out at whatever is causing it. Suffering doesn't come from pain, but from *fighting against*, or *resisting*, pain.

With this insight, Siddhartha was able to identify suffering. Since he knew what caused suffering, he knew how to stop it. Suffering came from desire. By stopping desire, he could stop suffering. When his desire ended, he would achieve **nirvana**, which means "extinguishment (like a candle being blown out)." If he achieved *nirvana*, then he would no longer be reincarnated into another life. He was free from **samsara** (the wheel of life).

When Siddhartha realized the truths that led to *nirvana*, he became **the Buddha**. This means "the Enlightened One." He now knew the truths that led to the end of suffering, and could teach this enlightenment to others.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

### 3. The Four Noble Truths [see *The World's Wisdom*, §§21a]

These truths were explained as “the four noble truths.” The first truth is that **life is full of suffering**. If we are feeling pleasure, then we will feel pain when the pleasure stops. If we want something we cannot have, then that causes pain also.

The second truth is that suffering has a cause. (If we know the cause of suffering, then we can stop it.) **The cause of suffering is desire and “craving.”** We want food, or sex, or fame or success. The constant need for more and more is what keeps us in the wheel of life (*samsara*).

...the origin of suffering...is the craving for the gratification of the passions, or the craving for a future life [through reincarnation], or the craving for success in this present life.<sup>4</sup>

Since the cause of suffering is this desire, the way to *get rid of suffering* is to stop the desire. Stop *wanting* something, and its absence will no longer cause you pain. Thus the *third* “noble truth”: **there is an end** (more formally called “extinguishment”) **to suffering**.

...It is the destruction, in which no passion remains, of this very thirst. It is the laying aside of, the getting rid of, the being free from, the harboring no longer of this thirst.<sup>5</sup>

“Passion” means *any* emotion within a person that needs and wants something. Passion is that restlessness within us that continually reaches out for more. Passion is never satisfied, never gratified. Each new pleasure temporarily fills the appetite. But before long, the emotions want something more, something new, something fresh.

The Buddha’s insight was that if we can stop the desire, then we can stop the suffering that is caused by desire. And when we stop the desire and suffering, then we stop the cycle that keeps sending us around in another life. It is the desire that results in new karma, and new karma leads to another life.

So if one extinguishes desire (which then extinguishes suffering), one will not create any new karma. Extinguishing (“cessation of”) desire gets rid of karma. Without karma, there is no self to be reincarnated.<sup>6</sup> When one reaches the goal of ending desire, and ending the cycle of reincarnation, one (like the Buddha) has achieved *nirvana*.

So how does one cease desire, craving, thirsting for more and more satisfaction? **The fourth “noble truth” is that *there is a way***. This way is known as “**the Eightfold Path**.” (A full explanation of the Path can be found in the textbook by Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, pp. 103–112.)

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<sup>4</sup> *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* 1–8, trans. By Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Suttas, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 11 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1881), as edited by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Buddhism is a little different from Hinduism. According to Hinduism, it is the *self* or soul that is reincarnated. But as we will see below, according to Buddhism, there is no constant self. There is only the karma that is reincarnated as it seeks a new self to fulfill its desire. Once the desire is gone, the karma cannot create another self. The self lacks the willpower to continue to exist, and fades away like fog in the morning sun.

Truly, it is this Noble Eightfold Path, that is to say: Right views; Right aspirations; Right speech; Right conduct; Right livelihood; Right effort; Right mindfulness; and Right contemplation....<sup>7</sup>

This path is divided among three primary activities. First of all, the person who would gain nirvana must *think right*. One has to throw away one’s old way of thinking, and take on a new view of reality. One’s ideas (“views”), and mental framework (“aspirations”) must show that he or she understands life in a new way.

Secondly, the person who aspires to nirvana must *act right*. Speech, actions, and the way one earns a living (“livelihood”), must be directed by one’s new understanding.

Thirdly, he or she must make an “effort” to transform her or his inner character. This change begins with “mindfulness” — awareness of one’s self. Although the Buddha rejected the harsh forms of asceticism practiced by the Hindu yogis and the Jains, he still believed that the only way to finally stop wanting and gain nirvana was by meditation.

**Question:** *Do you agree with the Buddha that desire is an endless force that always makes us want more? If so, do you agree that we ought to stop this desire? Are you persuaded by his solution, or can you think of a better one?*

#### 4. “Mindfulness” and Meditation

Meditation is a practice of quieting the senses and focusing the mind on one’s inner being. As we saw in discussing the Upanishads, it usually begins by sitting quietly and stopping incoming sensations. The meditator becomes more and more aware of her or his own body and its basic operations.

A primary operation of the body is breathing, so the meditator will often simply focus on the pattern of “in and out” — inhalation and exhalation. Some Buddhists will walk back and forth in a straight line, concentrating on each step. This concentration is what the Buddha meant by “mindfulness.”

Whatever the technique, the purpose is to draw the mind and consciousness away from sensations and feelings. Sensations (beautiful sights, stirring music, pleasant smells) and feelings (enthusiasm, sexual desire, anger) are the things that keep us desiring and craving more. We reach nirvana by controlling ourselves. These sensations and feelings no longer move us or attract us.

It is good to tame the mind, which is difficult to hold in and flighty, rushing wherever it lists;<sup>8</sup> a tamed mind brings happiness.

Let the wise man guard his thoughts, for they are difficult to perceive, very subtle, and they rush wherever they list; thoughts well-guarded bring happiness.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “To list” comes from the idea of a sinking ship “listing” or inclining to one side (before it finally capsizes). It includes the idea of being naturally inclined to move in some direction, or to prefer to do something. In other words, the mind is naturally inclined to follow each passing thought.

If a man's thoughts are not scattered, if his mind is not perplexed, if he has ceased to think of good or evil, then there is no fear for him while he is watchful.<sup>9</sup>

The constant restlessness of the human mind is clearly evident in our popular culture. TV and movies are specifically designed to show new images. The frame never stays at one spot very long. It is full of action, and constantly "cuts" from thing to another.

For Buddhism, this impatience and ceaseless motion is simply a way of meeting ever-changing desires. No wonder so many people in our society are confused, resentful, and full of fear for the future!

If this practice of "mindfulness" is continued long enough, eventually the meditator reaches contemplation. In contemplation, the meditator has no desire or needs. He or she is empty of feeling or passion. Contemplation is a state of total control of one's physical and psychological responses to life.

...A wise monk...[practices] watchfulness over the senses, contentedness,....

.....

As the Vassika plant sheds its withered flowers, men should shed passion and hatred, O monks!

The monk whose body and tongue and mind are quieted, who is collected, and has rejected the baits of the world, he is called quiet.<sup>10</sup>

The practical implications of the Buddha's teachings here are similar to those of the *Bhagavad Gita*. While we must act, we must act without passion or desire. We are most productive in human society when we simply do the job that is given us.

On the other hand, greedy pursuit of our own personal happiness leads to anxiety, conflict and destructive emotions. We are never really happy with life. Our achievements seem empty, because we never get "enough" (enough prestige, enough power, enough money).

**Question:** *Would you agree with the Buddha that endless motion in our entertainment is destructive of genuine peace? What changes would you be willing to make if it could make society more peaceful? Would you give up social media? Your smart phone? Netflix (or other sources of quick entertainment)?*

*Most Americans, even the working class, have material possessions beyond the wildest imaginations of 99% of the people who have ever lived. Given that our country is so very rich, why are so many people so unhappy? (You might want to read ahead to II.2, "Morality for Lay Buddhists" to help you think about this question.)*

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<sup>9</sup> E. A. Burtt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (New York: Penguin Books, A Mentor Book, 1955, 1982), 55. In the last paragraph of the quotation, notice the reemergence of the theme we saw in the Upanishads: the joy of nirvana is beyond good and evil.

<sup>10</sup> *Dhammapada* 25:375-377, trans. By Max Müller, *The Dhammapada, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 10 (Oxford University Press, 1881), as edited by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, p. 97.

## II. Buddhist Morality

### Textbook Readings:

Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, 102–119

Philip Novak, ed., *The World's Wisdom*, ch. 2: §§ 23–30

### 1. The Early Buddhist Communities

Because of the importance of meditation, early Buddhism was practiced by monks. Like the Hindu ascetics, Buddhism was a religion for men (and, to a lesser extent, women) who were willing to give up ordinary life.

Marriage, romance, affection, and sex were out of the question. All of these experiences required the passion that destroyed the possibility of achieving nirvana. The same was true of earning a living. A career needs ambition (to “get ahead in life”) and desire (to earn money, to get wealthy).

The first Buddhists were monks or nuns who spent their day in meditation. They did not grow their own food or earn money to buy it. They got their food by walking around and begging. A person who begs for food and lives on the alms people give her or him is known as a “mendicant.”

India's climate is divided between the dry months and the rainy months (known as the “monsoon season”). Buddhist mendicants would wander during the dry months; but the rains made it difficult to travel. So they came together during the rainy season. Eventually these informal communities became formal monasteries.

A monastery is a community of monks or nuns who live together for emotional support and religious guidance. All of the Buddhist monasteries taken together were called the Sangha (“the community”).

With the formation of the Sangha, the last of the “**Triple Gem**” (also called the “Three-fold Jewel”) of Buddha was founded. The first of the Jewels was *the Buddha*. The second jewel was the Buddha's teaching and doctrine, called “*the Dharma*.” The third jewel, the *Sangha*, was the community that lived by the Dharma.

I take refuge in the Buddha!  
I take refuge in the Dharma!  
I take refuge in the Sangha!<sup>11</sup>

So early Buddhism was primarily directed at people who gave up the routine joys and pleasures of life. They lived in the community of monks or nuns, and followed the Buddha's teaching. Through meditation, they hoped to achieve what they considered to be the far greater bliss of passionlessness and contentment.

But what place did ordinary people have in Buddhism? After all, their everyday lives denied them the opportunity to pursue and hopefully achieve nirvana.

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<sup>11</sup> Robert C. Lester, *Buddhism: The Path to Nirvana*, Part Eight of *Religious Traditions of the World*, H. Byron Earhart, ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), p. 857.

## 2. Morality for Lay Buddhists

According to the Buddha, although lay Buddhists (people who were not monks or nuns) could not achieve nirvana, they could learn and practice basic moral discipline. This discipline was summarized as follows:

Let him not kill any living being, let him not take what has not been given [to him], let him not speak falsely, and let him not drink intoxicating drinks, let him refrain from unchaste sexual intercourse, and let him not eat untimely food at night. Let him not wear wreaths nor use perfumes, let him lie on a couch spread on the earth. ...Let him dutifully maintain his parents, and practice an honorable trade. The householder who observes this strenuously goes to the gods....<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the lay Buddhist was to abstain from anything that suggested or promoted unnecessary passion or desire. That is why it was forbidden to eat food at night. It was unnecessary food. Wreaths, perfumes, and fancy furniture were luxuries that served no useful purpose. They simply increased the wish to show off and indulge in expensive tastes.

Buddhists did not always consistently practice the command not to kill *any* living thing. Some Buddhists allowed it as long as one did not kill the animal one's self, and it was not killed specifically for one's own use.<sup>13</sup> The Buddha expanded this command as follows:

Let him refrain from hurting all creatures, both those that are strong and those that tremble.<sup>14</sup>

So the Buddha's primary concern was that his followers should not hurt anything else simply in order to make life easier or happier for one's self.

"Unchaste sexual intercourse" was any relations outside of marriage. While any form of sexual relations promoted passion, at least marriage disciplined that passion and kept it within bounds. Outside of those bounds, sexuality was a "burning heap of coals."<sup>15</sup> The fire of desire would consume one and burn one up.

But realist that he was, the Buddhist recognized that not all men could even reach this level of discipline. At the very least, however, he insisted that a man should not "transgress with another man's wife."<sup>16</sup> Presumably such a man could gratify his sexual needs through a prostitute or some other willing girl.

This paragraph comes after a paragraph that warns against stealing. One should not take anything that belongs to another. So adultery was especially wrong because one was getting sexual use and pleasure from a woman that belonged to another man. This implies that the Buddha went

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<sup>12</sup> *Culavagga, Dammikasutta* 25-29, in Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 98.

<sup>13</sup> See the comments and texts in Wm. Theodore De Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China, & Japan*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1969), pp. 91-2.

<sup>14</sup> *Culavagga, Dammikasutta* 19, in Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 97.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, in Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 98.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

along with (although he may not have personally agreed with) the common view in ancient societies that a wife was a husband's property.

The Buddha also warned against alcoholic drinks:

For through intoxication stupid people commit sins.... Let him avoid this seat of sin, this madness, this folly.<sup>17</sup>

Drunkenness caused two problems. Drunken people did things they should not have done. Secondly, drunkenness caused people to do things they *would not* have done if they had stayed in their "right" mind. Alcoholic drinks kept people from being fully aware of their actions and thoughts. Only a person who was fully self-conscious was able to discipline her or his passions and curb her or his desires.

The Buddha also encouraged people to fast on several days each month, even if they could not do it to the same extent as monks or nuns. But the most important thing lay people could contribute to the *Sangha*, the larger Buddhist community, was to provide food for the monks.

On the surface, this might look like a selfish motivation. Since the monks (and nuns) couldn't grow or buy their own food, they had to get it from somewhere. So one might assume that the Buddha convinced lay people that they would be "blessed" (he called it "receiving merit") if they gave food to the monastic communities.

But in fact there was a genuine two-way relationship between the monks and the lay Buddhists. The lay Buddhists provided food and shelter (by building monasteries) for the monks. The monks provided religious rituals, moral teaching, and a cultural center for the community. In a time when life was routine and without a great deal of excitement, the monasteries provided a combination of education and entertainment (through their rituals and ceremonies).

In general, lay Buddhists were not expected to gain nirvana in their present life. (Only the monks could do that.) But by living right and providing for the monks, they hoped to gain "merit." With enough merit, they could hope to be born into a better life where they *could* gain nirvana.

Or even better, they might be born into the realm of the gods. (The only problem with that is that eventually the merit "wore out" and they would come back to earth.)

Monks spent a life of mental and moral discipline and meditation, and hoped to gain nirvana. Buddhists who were not ready to spend their lives in this way tried to live in accordance with basic moral guidelines and contribute to the physical needs of the monks. They hoped to gain merit that would either gain heaven or a better life in which they could pursue a more ideal life-style.

**Question:** Do you have a *right* to pleasure of any kind (here we're primarily talking about sexual pleasure and pleasure through mind-altering substances)? Is pleasure the same thing as happiness? Why or why not?

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 24, in Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 98.

### 3. Nirvana

As we have seen, nirvana meant extinguishing (putting out) desire and thereby putting out the karma that led to another life. If one no longer had karma, one was not reincarnated into another life.

What was the nature of nirvana? When Buddhism talked about nirvana's "bliss," what was it talking about? What did a person experience in nirvana? Nirvana was not the same as the prevalent western idea of heaven (influenced by Christianity).

Even though Buddhists continued to believe in the realm of the gods where one could achieve happiness, even that heavenly bliss would end. The "heaven" of Buddhism was gained by merit, and all merit eventually wore out. Then the person returned to earth, where they continued to have to work towards nirvana. Only nirvana could end the cycle of "the wheel of life" (*samsara*).

So the *nirvana* of Buddhism was equivalent to the *moksha* of Hinduism. Both terms referred to the final release from the endless chain of lives (*samsara*) that a person was otherwise condemned to live.

One can compare the wheel of life to the orbit of a spaceship around earth. Earth's gravity forces the spaceship to orbit it. But the spaceship can achieve "escape velocity." It gains enough speed to free itself from earth gravity and can fly through space.

Just like earth's gravity ties the space ship to earth, karma ties us to life. It keeps us in a body. (Karma is made by desire. Desires can only be met through a body. We need physical sensations to meet our wants.)

But nirvana is the "escape velocity" that finally breaks us free from the wheel of life. When we achieve nirvana, we are empty of desire. Our karma evaporates. Like moisture in the desert, it becomes gas or vapor. It is no longer strong enough to produce another body. Nirvana finally frees us from the boundaries of space, time, and personality.

In Hinduism, this freedom from personality or individuality was expressed in the phrase, "Atman is Brahman." *Atman* was the self, but not an individual self. It was the cosmic self that was identical with the universal principle of being (Brahman). So Hinduism said that there was a self. However, the true self was not the self of any individual.

Similarly, the goal of Buddhism is to become empty of desire and self, and thus avoid reincarnation into another life.

**Question:** *Do you find the idea of personal extinction scary? Why or why not? Is it selfish to believe in the continuation of personal identity after death? Or does the belief in immortality or resurrection enable us to live more moral lives here and now? (The next section will also help you think about these issues.)*

### 4. The Extinction of the Self

Buddhism took this idea and carried it to its logical conclusion. In contrast to Hinduism's *Atman*, Buddhism held the doctrine (teaching) of *anatta* (also written "*anatman*"). "An-" means "no," and "-atman" of course comes from the Hindu word. So *anatta* meant that there was *no self*.

Buddhism said that the “self” was in fact an “aggregate” of temporary sensations. “Aggregate” implies a combination of different bits and pieces of stuff thrown together and mixed up.

The “self” is made up with bits and pieces of sense data. Right now my sensations are primarily focused on my computer screen and my ideas. In the background, my son is listening to TV. I hear what sounds like a truck outside. A door is opening at this instant, and there are footsteps upstairs. I now hear my daughter and wife talking to each other. Even as I write, one set of sensations replaces another.

We naturally think that throughout these changing sensations there is something constant and unchanging — the self that senses all these things. But how do “I” know that? The only way “I” know about this supposed self is through the constantly changing sensations.

The Buddha taught that we are in fact ignorant of reality. Our ignorance creates the illusion of a self. This illusion brings pain and suffering.

The idea of ignorance is what gives the root to the huge poison-tree of mundane [ordinary] existence with its trunk of pain.<sup>18</sup>

As we have already seen, suffering comes from hanging onto the momentary sensation and making it last. We suffer when pleasure stops. We also suffer when we mistakenly believe that pain is real. But pain is only a temporary experience. The “I” is the illusion created by the enduring memory of past pain and the fear that it will return. If we let go of the hope for pleasure and the fear of pain, then self vanishes.

Let no man ever cling to what is pleasant, or to what is unpleasant... .

Let, therefore, no man be attached to anything; [if a man loves something,] loss of the beloved is evil. Those who are attached to nothing, and hate nothing, have no fetters.

From pleasure comes fear; he who is free from pleasure knows neither grief nor fear.<sup>19</sup>

If we desire something, then we want to get it. If we get it, then we want to keep it. If we lose it, we experience pain. The self is the sum total of our wishes and fears — desire to have or desire to avoid losing what we have.

But it is difficult to let go of the illusion of the self. According to Buddhism, we are bound to life and the illusion of the self by a chain of sensation and karma. A physical body has sensations, these sensations create desires, desires make us hold onto life.<sup>20</sup> The more we try to satisfy these desires, the more karma we create. After death, that karma needs a way of satisfying its unfulfilled desires, and so it creates a new body.

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<sup>18</sup> *Buddhacarita* 16.36, trans. by Cowell, *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*, ed. by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Burt, *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, 63.

<sup>20</sup> According to Buddhist teaching, there are twelve steps in the wheel of life. It begins with “ignorance” (of the Buddha’s teaching). Ignorance creates karma, and that leads to consciousness. (Another way of saying that is that our past actions give us an identity or a history.) It is consciousness that forms or takes on a body that can sense things. In other words, without a body the consciousness cannot be *conscious* of anything. For a graphic representation and further explanation, see Lester, *Buddhism*, in *Religious Traditions of the World*, p. 907 and also pp. 904-908.

If one can break any link in the chain, one can stop the wheel of life that takes us round and round and round.... The ties that bind us to our bodies will vanish. And without bodies and its accompanying sensations, there is no ongoing self.

These complex ideas can be explained by the following illustration. Let's say I taste two flavors of ice cream. I have a "sensation." I decide I *like* vanilla, but don't like chocolate. My sensations have resulted in desire. I desire vanilla, and desire to avoid chocolate.

As my desires multiply and grow stronger, I *create* a self. "I" become identified as someone who likes vanilla ice cream, hamburgers (but not, say, fish), corn (but not, say, broccoli), and so on.

**My "self" is the combination of all my accumulated likes and dislikes.**

You might protest: "I'm more than the combination of my tastes in food. I have an identity, a personality." Think carefully: subtract *all* your desires, your likes and dislikes, the things you try to achieve and the things you try to avoid or get rid of: preferences in dress, politics, musical styles, interests (e.g., auto mechanics or cooking) and activities (e.g., sports or music).

Take away all these attitudes and attachments. What is left of the "self?" The Buddha might well have been right: nothing. For many westerners, this is a scary idea. But for many Buddhists, this is exactly what they want to happen. They want to get rid of attachments, likes, and wants so that the self will disappear "into thin air."

So nirvana means: (1) the end (extinguishment or extinction) of desire, which leads to the end of suffering; (2) the end of karma; and (3) the end of the self as a separate entity. Generally speaking, this last step happens at death. Without desires or needs, there is nothing to create a new self in a body. The "self" can fly free in the cosmos, so to speak. It dissipates or empties into no-thing-ness. It is not-any-separate-thing. No-thing-ness is simply "nothingness."

By putting a stop to ignorance and what follows from it..., [he] thoroughly reaches at last to absolute thinness. Then he becomes blissfully extinct.<sup>21</sup>

**Question:** *For most people of European and American culture, the idea of the "self" is beyond question. Our language of "rights" and "privacy" assumes that each person is an individual, inviolable unit. Are you willing to consider the possibility that we are mistaken?*

*Discuss the idea that your sense of self is created by consistently practiced likes. Can you figure out any way to disprove it? Is there really a separate self, a thing that is "really you"? How would you know it or prove its existence?*

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<sup>21</sup> *Buddhacarita* 16.43, trans. by Cowell, *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*, ed. by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 90.

# III. Two Ways of Being Buddhist

## Textbook Readings:

Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, 119–127

Philip Novak, ed., *The World's Wisdom*, ch. 2: §§ 39–40

## 1. Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

As we saw earlier, the Buddhism founded by the Buddha was primarily designed to be lived out by monks and nuns. These people withdrew from the wider society and gave up the “ordinary” lives of marriage, family, and work.

Those people who were unwilling to undergo this rigorous life of self-denial blessed the monks and nuns by providing food and shelter. They were in turn blessed with good karma, religious education and moral guidance. But in general, they were not expected to live up to the highest ideals of Buddhist practice and morality.

This Buddhism was guided by the monasteries (communities of monks or nuns). These monasteries were ruled by the head monks. So it was called *Theravada* Buddhism. “Theravada” means “tradition of the *theras*.” The *theras* were the senior monks.

So Theravada Buddhism was a rigorously monastic Buddhism. The life of the monks and nuns was to be one of thorough self-discipline. Through asceticism, the monks and nuns hoped to break the chains of desire, and thereby achieve nirvana.

Theravada Buddhism is sometimes simply called “Conservative Buddhism,” since it is the traditional form of Buddhism, apparently taught by the Buddha and developed by the early monastic communities.

About the beginning of the common era (around the time that Jesus was born in Palestine), some Buddhists began to question this form of Buddhism. In the first place, they said, it was elitist. Why should ordinary people be excluded from the full practice of Buddhism?

This revised form of Buddhism emphasized that *everyone* was able to achieve enlightenment, not just the monks and nuns. It called itself *Mahayana* Buddhism. “Mahayana” means “the Great Vehicle,” or, in more colorful language, “the Big Ferryboat.” The “ferryboat” was based on the idea of taking a person across the river of life to nirvana.

Mahayana’s unflattering title for Theravada was *Hinayana*, “the Little Ferryboat.” Mahayana considered itself the “Big Ferryboat” since it could “hold” more people than Theravada. Theravada could only “carry” monks and nuns to enlightenment and nirvana. Mahayana believed it was capable of enabling everyone to achieve enlightenment. People didn’t need the difficult discipline of separation from everyday life.

## 2. We Are Already In Nirvana (“Samsara is Nirvana”)

As we have seen, Theravada believed that everyday life kept a person attached to passion and desire. How could a person who was married, had a family, and a job find the inner peace that came from complete detachment from people and things?

Mahayana said that Theravada was moving towards the goal in the wrong way. The goal of all Buddhism was to end suffering by ending selfish desire. But Theravada's way of achieving that goal was itself *selfish* (at least that was what Mahayana thought).

Theravada Buddhists (monks or nuns) were supposed to be denying themselves. But they were still concerned about their own well-being — being without suffering. So even though they were moving towards the extinction of self, they were still concerned about — the *self*. They were focused on the achievement of their own highest desire (the end of desire!). Mahayana Buddhism said they should have reached out and helped *others* to achieve this goal.

Mahayana said that the better way to achieve true enlightenment was to give up the preoccupation with one's *own* enlightenment. Enlightenment was still the ultimate goal. But it was better to work for the enlightenment of *everyone*.

In other words, the monks and nuns in the more traditional form of Buddhism thought only of themselves. Mahayana Buddhism thought that one ought to take the focus off of one's private enlightenment. One should rather see how one could help *others* achieve this greatest of goals.

But then what *was* nirvana? It wasn't the utter bliss of the monk or nun in the quiet of her or his meditation. So where was it to be found? Mahayana said that one didn't have to *reach* it. Everyone could experience nirvana wherever one was. This meant that there was really no difference between *samsara* (this life of pain and desire) and nirvana.

After all, what was nirvana? It was the achievement of "nothing." One got "there," only to discover it was "no where." It was no-thing. It could not be anything different from samsara, since it had no distinguishing characteristics. One didn't have to work hard to get to nirvana, since there was nowhere to go. Nirvana was here and now. One only had to know how to find it.

As is Nirvana so is Samsara  
Do not think there is any distinction.

.....  
Do not sit at home, do not go to the forest,  
But recognize mind wherever you are  
When one abides in complete and perfect enlightenment,  
Where is Samsara and where is Nirvana?<sup>22</sup>

In order to achieve enlightenment, you didn't need to stay at home (away from the hustle of work and the bustle of business). Nor did you need to go into the forest (like a monk or Hindu yogi). You didn't need to "achieve" it at. All you had to do was "abide" in enlightenment. It is already and always available to everyone. And what was this enlightenment?

"This is my self and this is another."  
Be free of this bond which encompasses you about,  
And your own self is thereby released.  
  
Do not err in this matter of self and other.  
Everything is Buddha without exception.

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<sup>22</sup> From Saraha, *Dohakosa*, as translated by D. S. Snellgrove in Conze, *Buddhist Texts*, 238. Edited and presented by De Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition*, 121.

Here is that immaculate and final stage,  
Where thought is pure in its true nature.<sup>23</sup>

Enlightenment is the realization that there is no distinction between my self and yourself. There is no separation between me and you, between this and that. Everyone is one, “everything is Buddha.”

This was similar to the Hindu answer that “Atman is Brahman.” The true self was ultimate reality. The major difference was between Hinduism’s *Brahman* and Buddhism’s *Buddhahood*. Brahman was an eternal reality. Buddhahood was a process in which one continually realized that *nothing* had eternal existence.

So enlightenment was the recognition that all things share in the great process or movement of life. I dare not hold on to pleasure, since that may be someone else’s pain. I do not react to pain, since that is some other being’s pleasure.

The positive side of this viewpoint is that when I stop worrying about *my* pleasure and pain, life becomes bearable. When I am not focused on what *I* deserve, I don’t get angry at injustice or persecution. When I stop complaining that life is “unfair” (which it often is) I am emotionally free. I can accept life’s good things — those moments of joy that are experienced in family and friends, in hard work, in art, and so on.

From the typical western point of view, the down side is one we saw in Upanishadic Hinduism. This view would seem to do away with all moral distinctions. Terrorized and terrorizer, hater and hated, rich and poor are one. This idea is clearly stated in *Siddhartha*, a modern Western novel that retells the Buddha story.

...everything that exists is good — death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly. Everything is necessary, everything needs only my agreement, my assent, my loving understanding; then all is well with me and nothing can harm me.<sup>24</sup>

**Question:** Consider the claim that “everything is necessary” in light of such injustices as the Holocaust, the enslavement of African-Americans, or the deaths of millions under Stalin or Mao Tse-Tung. Does that statement make sense?

Another example: consider a recent political problem that makes you angry: say, the killing of African-Americans by police officers (or the deliberate killing of police officers in retaliation)? Do those actions simply need my “loving understanding?”

What should be our primary focus: should we concentrate on fighting against injustice, or should most of our energy be focused on accepting life as it is? Is there a balance, and if so, where is it, and how do we achieve it?

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, trans. Hilda Rosner (New York: Bantam Books, 1951, 1972), 144.

### 3. The Bodhisattva

According to Theravada (Conservative Buddhism), a person who experienced the bliss of nirvana in present life was an *arhat*: a fully perfected saint, someone who was in total control of her or his passions and sensations.

But according to Mahayana, instead of entering into nirvana, one should turn around. Instead of becoming an arhat, one voluntarily surrender this last goal (just as one was about to achieve it). Instead of seeking to reach one's own nirvana, it was better to help *others* reach the bliss of enlightenment.

Mahayana compared the arhat (the ideal or goal of the monk or nun) to a firefly that only gave off light for itself.

...A firefly...doesn't imagine that its glow will light up all India or shine all over it, and so the disciples and private buddhas don't think that they should lead all beings to Nirvana...after they have gained full enlightenment.<sup>25</sup>

The "disciples" were people who followed the traditional Theravada teachings. The "private buddhas" were those who reached enlightenment only for themselves. They didn't give any thought to communicating it to others. According to Mahayana, the *arhats* said they were letting go of the self but were really selfish. The *arhat* kept the truth of enlightenment to herself or himself instead of sharing it with others.

A person who took the vow to help others achieve enlightenment was a *bodhisattva*. The bodhisattva gave up his own enlightenment so that others could know it. He or she was guided by a spirit of compassion for other beings, that they might be freed from suffering and pain.

[The Bodhisattva says:] ...I must save the whole world from the forest of birth, old age, disease, and rebirth... For all beings are caught in the net of craving, encompassed by ignorance, held by the desire for existence; they are doomed to destruction, shut in a cage of pain...;....

I care not at all for my own deliverance. I must save all beings from the torrent of rebirth with the raft of my omniscient mind. I must pull them back from the great precipice. I must free them from all misfortune, ferry them over the over the stream of rebirth.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to the image of the self-centered firefly in the earlier quotation, the bodhisattva was like the sun. He or she was more concerned with the well-being of others than her or his own release in the bliss of nirvana.

But the disc of the sun, when it has risen, lights up all India and shines all over it. Similarly the bodhisattva...when he has gained full enlightenment, brings countless beings to Nirvana.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> From *Pancavimsatisahasrika Prajnaparamita*, pp. 40-41, edited by De Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition*, p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> From *Siksamuccaya*, pp. 278-83, edited by De Bary, *Buddhist Tradition*, pp. 84, 85.

<sup>27</sup> From *Pancavimsatisahasrika Prajnaparamita*, pp. 40-41, edited by De Bary, *Buddhist Tradition*, p. 82.

So the bodhisattva was motivated by a spirit of compassion for all living things (“sentient beings” — beings that are able to sense and perceive). The compassion of the bodhisattva was the Mahayana way of saying that its holy men and women should be concerned with others rather than themselves.

Compassion was concern that all should reach enlightenment. And enlightenment, as we have seen, was rising above the needs of self. So Buddhist compassion meant that Buddhist holy men and women would put the enlightenment of others ahead of their own final nirvana.

*What is the role of “love” and “compassion” in society? Consider the angry reaction to Donald Trump: it is “loving” to denounce Trump for not being “loving”? Is that inconsistent?*

#### 4. Other-Power and Self-Power

The best we can tell, the historical Buddha taught that one reached nirvana by one’s own efforts. This ideal of helping *others* to reach enlightenment was new.

In the earlier Buddhist view, the gods could not help, since they had achieved their status in heaven by good karma. Since they were trapped by their *own* karma, they could not help *others* escape karma. Their karma would eventually wear out and send them back to a this-worldly existence. (The same thing would happen to any human who achieved heaven.)

So according to Theravada, one achieved enlightenment through *self-power*. Nirvana was, as we have seen, reached through rigorous self-denial and discipline of one’s body and spirit. No one could do it for you. You had to do it for yourself.

In contrast, Mahayana said that one was saved by *other-power*. It did not require any hard effort to achieve enlightenment. All one had to do was to hear the message of the Buddha and believe it.

Whoever...shall hear this ... [teaching] and after hearing, if only a single stanza, joyfully accept it, even with a single rising thought, to those also, Bhaishajyara, be they young men or young women of good family, I predict their destiny to supreme and perfect enlightenment.<sup>28</sup>

The youth “of good family” were laypeople. In Theravada, these people were generally thought to be incapable of nirvana. But this Buddhist text assured them that even their simple devotion and mental commitment was sufficient to achieve “perfect enlightenment.”

So in order to achieve enlightenment, one didn’t have to conquer one’s desires. One didn’t have struggle with one’s self until it was extinguished. Rather enlightenment was the result of religious belief and practice.

...Those who shall take, read, make known, recite, copy, and after copying always keep in memory...but a single stanza of this teaching;...who shall worship that book with flowers, incense, perfumed garlands, ointment, powder, clothes, umbrellas, flags,

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<sup>28</sup> *Saddharma-pundarika Sutra* 10.1, trans. By H. Kern, *The Saddharma-pundarika, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 21 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1884), p. 213, as edited by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 94.

banners, music, etc., and with acts of reverence such as bowing and joining hands...I predict their destiny of supreme and perfect enlightenment.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, enlightenment by *other-power* meant that one was “saved” from the results of bad karma by believing in the Buddha and trusting in the compassion of the bodhisattvas. Enlightenment was no longer the result of hard work, it was the result of faith.

We see that Mahayana Buddhism emphasized “other-power.” It said that enlightenment was achieved through dependence on the Buddha and the compassion bodhisattvas (who had taken a vow to bring all things to enlightenment). This belief meant that the difficult self-denial of the monks and nuns was less important.

## 5. The Buddha as Teacher and as Divine

“Other-power” also led to another change in emphasis. In the older (“Theravada”) Buddhism, after the Buddha had reached nirvana, he was no longer a person in any normal sense of the word. Since he had finally been enlightened about the true nature of his self (that it was really nothing), his karma had vanished. When he died, his identity disappeared in the infinite cosmos.

His karma was like a drop of dye in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. After it was mixed up and spread from San Francisco to Tokyo, there wasn’t “enough left” of the Buddha to “find him.”

The Sangha (the Buddhist community) still had his teaching, but the Buddha *as a person* was unimportant. Theravada didn’t believe that you could pray to the Buddha, since there was nothing to pray to. The Buddha couldn’t help you, since “he” didn’t “exist.”

But according to Mahayana, the Buddha was an eternal source of compassion and enlightenment. The Buddha had actually achieved enlightenment in some infinite past. But because human beings were so stubborn and dense, he tried many different ways to tell his teaching. Each of these different ways was called a “vehicle.”

Each vehicle was communicated by a Buddha in a different age of the world. The “Shakyamuni” Buddha (“the Sage of the Shakyas Tribe” — the historical Buddha’s tribe) was simply the Buddha who had appeared in one particular place and time.

In other words, the Mahayana Buddha was the eternal source of compassion and enlightenment for all who believed in him. As one prayed to the Buddha and sought his guidance, one gained the “Buddha-nature.”

...Today I have been born into the Buddha-family and I am now a Buddha-son. ... Now I invite the world to Buddhahood, and, incidently, to happiness.<sup>30</sup>

As we have seen, this “Buddhahood” was the spirit of enlightenment that found the unity of the self in all things. To be a “Buddha-son” meant that one lived ultimately for in the awareness that true bliss was present here and now. By worshipping the Buddha, one could lay aside the false ideas that tied one to passions and selfishness.

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<sup>29</sup> *Saddharma-pundarika Sutra* 10.1, trans. By Kern, *Saddharma-pundarika*, p. 214, as edited by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 95.

<sup>30</sup> *Religions of Asia*, John Y. Fenton, et. al., editors Third Edition (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 125, quoting Marion Matics, *Entering the Path of Enlightenment* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 156.

This new emphasis meant that the Buddha had actually become divine. The Buddha was no longer simply a long-dead teacher. His spiritual presence showed people that all the ideas and attitudes that cause pain are empty and not worth following. His continuing compassion helped people break free from their self-centeredness and find peace in reality as it is.

**Question:** *Is becoming a good person primarily a result of “hard work” and self-discipline, or the outcome of trusting in and depending upon some divine being or power? If you say it takes both, what is the proper balance between “work” and “faith”?*

*Does living a good life need belief in God (gods)? Or can we discover and practice moral truth by ourselves?*

*(Both sections 4 and 5 can help you think about this question.)*

## IV. Confucianism



### Textbook Readings:

- Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, 154-177
- Philip Novak, ed., *The World's Wisdom*, ch. 3: §§ 1–13

### 1. Overview of Chinese Religion

We have studied the two great religions of Indian origin: Hinduism and Buddhism. Hinduism emphasizes social order and happiness. Buddhism says that freedom from suffering and tranquillity is more important.

Confucianism, like Hinduism, is a religion of order. According to Confucianism, a good society is one in which a clearly defined role in the community. Religion provides the rituals by which each person is shaped into a well-functioning member of the community.

Taoism rejects the goals of an ordered society. We cannot know what is ultimately good for a community. Actions that look like they may produce a good community may, in the long run, produce bad. Actions that appear bad may, in the long run, produce good.

In spite of this fundamental difference, Confucianism and Taoism are agreed on one point: the goal of religion and good character is *harmony*. People and society are to be harmonious.

For Confucianism, this happens because of a well-ordered relationship between leaders and citizens. It is closer to a philosophy than it is a religion: how do people live full lives in society.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Part of the problem is that the distinction between “religion” and “philosophy” is a western one. For most of the world’s history, in almost all of the world’s cultures, religion and philosophy were simply two ways of thinking about the ultimate questions of life. (“What is truth?” “What is real?” “How do we know anything?” “How should we act, and why?”) Only in the modern western world have these two subjects been separated. Chinese did not even have *words* to distinguish between *religion* and *philosophy* until this century (after they had studied western

It talks about relations in the family, and between the government leaders and its citizens. It encourages education and self-improvement as a way of living a full life in society.

For Taoism, harmony means acceptance of all of life, good and bad. We cannot say that *this* is good and *that* is bad. So accept life as it is. This “all of life” is called “the Tao.”

However, both of these “belief systems” are based certain basic ideas. Probably the most basic idea in Chinese religion is the idea of the Tao (pronounced “dow”<sup>32</sup>).

The basic meaning of “Tao” is “the way.” In the first place, it referred to the idea that the stars followed a way or path in the heavens. Ancient cultures realized that the stars moved in regular patterns. Many societies believed that the way to success and happiness was to repeat these patterns on earth.

There were not only regular movements among the stars, but of the moon and sun. Because of the importance of a regular food supply, all societies paid close attention to the regular cycles of the moon and sun. This gave them a way to figure out the months<sup>33</sup> and the seasons. Months and seasons were ways of calculating when to plant and harvest crops.

Just as the regular periods of the moon and sun determined the seasons, ancient societies came to believe that the paths of the stars determined the paths of the life of an individual or a whole society.<sup>34</sup>

So “the Tao” came to mean the entire pattern of the heavens. This meant that society ought to figure out and put itself “in sync with” with the heavens. People on earth could achieve harmony by imitating the harmonies of the stars, sun, and moon. Follow the Tao, the way, by following the harmony of Heaven.

The proper harmony of “Heaven” was maintained in part by sacrifices and rituals. The purpose of these ceremonies was to enact on earth the order of Heaven. There were opposing forces in Heaven. The rituals made sure that the proper balance was maintained.

Anything out of the ordinary (extremely bad weather, odd events in the sky, freaks of nature ) might signal that Heaven was out of balance. If left uncorrected, the ruler could lose the

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thought) (Liu Xiaogan, “Taoism,” in *Our Religions*, ed., Arvind Sharma [New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1993], 238).

<sup>32</sup> There are two different systems of pronunciation of Chinese words. The older system is called the “Wade–Giles” system. Especially since mainline China has reopened to the west (with Richard Nixon’s famous trip to China), a newer system has become more prevalent, known as “pinyin.” (For example, the Wade–Giles version of the capital of China is “Peking.” Today we know it as “Beijing.”)

The pinyin spelling of “Tao” is “Dao.” As you can see, pinyin is easier to pronounce, but many of the materials that the reader of this book might read still use the older system. So for sake of consistency, this work will primarily use Wade–Giles. Where the pinyin spelling is important, it will be noted.

<sup>33</sup> A “month” originally meant one entire cycle of the moon’s phases. The Old English word for “moon” is *mona*. The Old English word for “month” is *monath*.

<sup>34</sup> This was the origin of astrology. Ancient peoples became aware that the movements of the sun and moon “caused” the seasons and regular patterns of nature on earth. How? Well, they “knew” that a “spirit” or “life–force” “caused” a human body to move about. Likewise, they assumed, the “spirit” or energy of the sun and moon resulted in changes on earth. In the same way, they concluded, the patterns of the stars “caused” the pattern of human life. If you were born “under” a star, that star “determined” what would happen to you.

“Mandate of Heaven”<sup>35</sup> and be overthrown. The ruler could correct the situation by changing his policies.

This idea of “balance” became expressed as the ideas of “Yin” and “Yang.” Yang was the power of light and warmth. Yin was the power of darkness and coolness. Just as the seasons move from winter to summer and back again, all life moves between Yin and Yang.

Yang is the energy that gets life going (think of the fire and drive of sexual passion). But just as life ends naturally in the quiet of death, Yin naturally completes Yang. Neither is “good” or “bad.” Yin or Yang are only “bad” when one is out of balance with the other.

Since the sun brings heat and light, it is associated with Yang. Since the moon rules during the cool of the night, it is connected with Yin. Also, since the work of summer (planting and harvesting in the fields) was primarily male work, Yang became viewed as a male force. During winter, most work was done indoors and was “domestic” household duties like making cloth. So Yin was thought of as female.<sup>36</sup> But both Yin and Yang were necessary for the complete balance of life.

Because rulers and leaders in Chinese society wanted to be in harmony with Heaven, they needed a way to figure out the will of Heaven. They developed forms of “divination.” They would scratch “yes” and “no” on bones or shells. After burning the bits, cracks near the “yes” or “no” would signal the answer of the gods. Divination is still practiced today, especially on the island of Taiwan.

**Question:** *Do you think the upcoming (or recent) election reflects the “Mandate of Heaven”? Is that Mandate the same thing the result of a popular election? Is it possible that the “people” might “get it wrong”?*

*Many people feel as if something in western society is out of balance. Why do you think people feel that way? If indeed this is the case, then how do we respond? What’s a good way of dealing with the perception that life (perhaps one’s whole world) is “out of control”?*

## 2. Respect for and Sacrifices to One’s Ancestors

The previous section talked about harmony with the cosmos, in society and politics. Perhaps the most important area of harmony was harmony with one’s ancestors. Some of these practices that express this harmony are among the very earliest that we know about in Chinese religion. They still influence it today.

After death one’s father and mother became spiritual beings. (They were neither in “heaven” or “hell” as westerners understand it. However, they could continue to influence events on earth.) Just as one tried to please them and take care of them in life, one honored them in death.

At regular intervals (especially at spring and fall), a family would have a banquet. They invited their ancestors to join them. A person was assigned the role of being “possessed” by the

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<sup>35</sup> “Mandate” means support or authorization. Chinese rulers were always concerned about being “in sync” with the order and harmony of Heaven, the cosmic source of peace and order on earth.

<sup>36</sup> *Religions of Asia*, ed., Fenton et. al., 167.

ancestors. In this way, the ancestors experienced the joy and happiness of their earthly descendants.

When the parents were alive, they took care of the children. In the same way, the descendants prayed to their ancestors to give them prosperity and happiness. So the ancestors became god-like beings. At the banquet, the ancestors were fed and blessed with gifts. In return, the Chinese looked for riches, a long life, and (especially) descendants to pray to *them* after *they* became “ancestors.”

The importance of the ancestors is expressed in the following early poetry:

[He says], “While I present [this] noble bull,  
And they assist me in setting for the sacrifice,  
O great and august Father,  
Comfort me, your filial son.

.....  
You comfort me with the eyebrows of longevity;  
You make me great with manifold blessings.  
I offer this sacrifice to my meritorious father,  
And to my accomplished mother.<sup>37</sup>

The ancestors were fed by these sacrifices, just as the ancient Vedic Hindus believed that their sacrifices of animals, butter, and milk fed their gods. The sacrificer hoped to receive a long life, wealth, and power.

These ancestor rituals became the basis of “filial piety.” To be “filial” means to respect, honor, and obey one’s parents. (The word “filial” comes from the Latin *filius*, meaning “son.”) “Piety” has the idea of a religious attitude, here in the sense of being devoted and reverent. So “filial piety” means to have the attitude of a devoted and reverent son.

### 3. The Setting of Confucius

One of the first thinkers to build on these general ideas was the philosopher Confucius. Confucius emphasized that “filial piety” was the fundamental building block of a harmonious society.

In Chinese, Confucius’ name was “K’ung Fu–tzu,” which means “Master Fu.” He is believed to have died in 479 B.C.E. According to the usual calculations, the Buddha had died only a year before in India.

Moreover, in this very year in Greece, the powerful Persian empire were defeated by the freedom-loving Greeks. This was the beginning of the “golden age” of Athens, the creation of democratic ideals, and the rise of the philosophers that we will read about in Part II. Also around this time, a small group of Hebrews returned from Babylonian exile to Jerusalem, and began to create Judaism.

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<sup>37</sup> “Sacrificial Odes of Kau, Ode 7,” taken from James Legge, trans., *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism*, part I, vol. 3, *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879), pp. 325–326, as edited by Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 191.

So this was a very important time in human history. There were so many significant changes in religion, philosophy, and culture between about 600 and 400 B.C.E. that historians have come to call it “the axial age.” (“Axial” refers to “axis.” It was as if history “turned around on” its axis during this time.)

People realized that it was not enough to depend on the traditions that their own culture or ethnic group had developed. People needed to act based on clear moral standards. Ethics and the study of character began during this time. Scholars and wise people used a combination of religious tradition and critical human reason to discuss: “what are the standards for good human character?”

Confucius (like the Hindus, Greeks, and Hebrews) lived during a time of confusion and upheaval. The earliest Chinese dynasty was the Shang dynasty. According to some calculations, it ruled for four hundred years. In 1122 B.C.E., it was followed by the Chou (pinyin: *Zhou*) dynasty. The Chou believed in “Heaven” (“T’ien”/“Tian”) and the Tao. During this dynasty, ancestor rituals became more complex.

About two hundred years before Confucius was born, the Chou dynasty was destroyed by invaders and rebellious groups within China. The chaos led to the “age of the hundred philosophers.” Thinkers tried to figure out what had gone wrong and how it could be fixed. Confucius believed that the Chou was a model of good government when order reigned. He wanted to restore the unity and wisdom that it stood for.

#### 4. Filial Piety and Ritual

Confucius began with the ancient Chinese concern with one’s ancestors. A good society was formed when each person respected one’s superiors. However, Confucius came to believe that people should have been less concerned about one’s ancestors in the spiritual world. Rather, true filial piety was concerned about relationships here and now.

Tzu-yu asked about being filial. The Master [Confucius] said, ‘Nowadays for a man to be filial means no more than that he is able to provide his parents with food. Even hounds and horses are, in some ways, provided with food. If a man shows no reverence, where is the difference.’<sup>38</sup>

Animals can “help” their parents. But animals do not (so far as we can know) develop *inner attitudes* of “reverence” (*hsiao*, “piety”). Almost all religious traditions recognize the difference between doing external actions by rote and doing actions out of a heart of sincerity and true commitment. (This seems to have been one of the universal insights of the “axial age.”) In other words, it is not enough *do* religious actions, one must develop a religious *spirit* and *attitude*.

How could one develop this inner attitude of respect towards parents and those who had authority in society? Confucius believed that *rituals* created social order. This idea was called *li*. *Li* is usually translated “propriety.” “Propriety” means to “be proper,” to act appropriately in any situation. Since a person who acts properly has good manners, *li* also implies the development of proper manners. A person with propriety knows how to act wherever he or she is.

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<sup>38</sup> *Analects*, II.7, translated with an introduction by D. C. Lau (Penguin Books, 1979).

In other words, Confucius believed that good manners were formed by public ritual. Rituals enabled everyone to find her or his place in the community. It created the proper relationship between people. Through ceremonies one learned to be respectful to one's parents and other people in positions of authority.

The basic idea behind *li* is the following. Through years of experience, parents and leaders learn what works. They also learn that certain actions have destructive consequences. But in every generation, the natural drives and energies of adolescence make young people believe that they know better than their parents.

Some of the drive that adolescence brings is good. Change keeps culture from stagnating. But sometimes this drive for change gets out of hand. Endless change makes people forget how to be civilized. Confucius emphasized that ritual was based on past custom.

The Master said, 'The Chou is resplendent in culture, having before it the example of the two previous dynasties. I am for the Chou.'<sup>39</sup>

The earlier rulers did not have complete guidelines. But Confucius believed that the Chou dynasty had all the resources one needed to govern and guide society in a civilized way. To be "civil-ized" is to be "civil," to be considerate of others. Without civilization, humans deteriorate into animals. Without discipline, the human community "goes to the dogs." Each person does what he or she wants to do, rather than what is best for the entire community.

According to Confucius, ritual taught people how to act towards each other. Public ceremonies helped people to understand that the good of the community is ultimately more important than personal satisfaction. By participating in ritual, one gave up one's private needs and became a part of the whole community. In a very real way, ceremonies *created* society. They transformed humans from animals into *human beings*.

**Question #1** *Has our society gone too far in supporting independence for young people? What is the proper balance between obedience of authority and recognition of the rights of each individual?*

**Question #2:** *Do we need new rituals to give us a better sense of human community? Should such ceremonies take place in public situations (school, politics) or specifically religious organizations? How do we have common rituals in a society where people have many different views of God, religion, morality? Can people pray together or invoke "God" if they believe in different gods (or none at all)?*

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<sup>39</sup> *Analects*, III.14, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin).

## 5. Ritual and good government

Although Confucius' ideal society was hierarchical, it was not authoritarian.

Lead the people with legal measures and regulate them by punishment, and they will avoid wrongdoing but will have no sense of honor and shame. Lead them with the power of virtuous example (*de*) and regulate them by the rules of *li*, and they will have a sense of shame and will thus rectify themselves.<sup>40</sup>

Rulers can *force* the people do the right thing out of fear. But according to Confucius, people ought to *want* to obey the law, simply because it's the law. To apply Confucius' idea to a modern day setting, he believed we ought to obey the speed limit (for example) because that is our *duty*, not because we are afraid of getting caught.

People ought to be motivated by "honor and shame," not by fear. To put those ideas into modern terms, people ought to be guided by integrity and self-esteem. We should obey the law because our "sense of self-worth" will not allow us to be disobedient. We would feel bad ("shame"). We would feel that we have betrayed our proper place in the community (we would have "dishonored" ourselves or our family).

Confucius believed that if people were to discipline themselves, their rulers also had to be disciplined. Leaders were to lead by the power of their own "virtuous example." As people participated in the public rituals (*li*), their lives would be transformed and "rectified" (made right).

Civic ceremonies helped everyone to find their place in society. Confucius wanted a place for everyone and everyone in her or his place. Life and society was harmonious because you knew who you were, where you belonged, what you were supposed to do, and how you related to everyone else in your community.<sup>41</sup>

*Why do many people today seem unconcerned about the consequences of their actions? Do we need to restore a sense of shame or guilt over wrongdoing?<sup>42</sup> How do we hold people responsible for their actions without stigmatizing them (or people who might be affected by their actions — e.g., a child born to an drug-addicted mother).*

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<sup>40</sup> *Analects*, 2.3, quoted in *Religions of Asia*, ed., Fenton et. al., 169.

<sup>41</sup> The word "regulate" in the phrase, "regulate them by the rules of *li*" means "kernels of wheat filling the ear evenly. This...conveyed...a single and concise image: kernels regularly and predictably filling their assigned space in an assigned pattern, over and over": *Religions of Asia*, Third edition, eds., Fenton and Miller, 169.

<sup>42</sup> The reader needs to be aware that shame and guilt are not identical concepts. One useful introduction to these ideas is found in David Chidester, *Patterns of Action: Religion and Ethics in a Comparative Perspective* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company), pp. 69–75. One might want to further discuss the differences between shame and guilt as ways of holding people responsible. Is one or the other a "better" way to ensure obedience to society's norms?

## 6. Benevolence

By having the proper relationship towards other people in one's community, one could become a "superior man." A superior man was a man (women were not encouraged to develop these skills) who guided all of his actions by "benevolence."

The Master said, "A youth, when at home, should be filial, and away from home he should be respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all, cultivate the friendship of good people. When he has time and opportunity, after the performance of these things, he should employ them in the arts."<sup>43</sup>

A "superior man," (*chun-tzu*) literally meant "prince's son." In all societies and all cultures, the upper classes have been the first to benefit from education and moral insights. Originally, the good life was a life of leisure in which the gentleman (the western equivalent of the *chun-tzu*) could read books, enjoy the arts, and think about life.<sup>44</sup>

But Confucius, like most great moral thinkers, realized that real moral superiority was not a result of one's social class but of inward growth and discipline. This discipline included respect of one's elders, sincerity and truthfulness, training and practice of the arts, and benevolence — concern for other human beings.

"Benevolence" is a translation of *ren*. Some other translations are "humaneness" (having the feelings proper to every human being), "fellow feeling" (compassion or sympathy), and "virtue" (a state of good moral character).<sup>45</sup>

In other words, *ren* means being a human being, instead of an animal driven by brute instincts. It means being able to put yourself in another person's shoes and feeling what he or she feels. This leads to the Confucian version of the Christian "Golden Rule":

Tzu-kung asked, 'Is there a single word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one's life?' The Master said, 'It is perhaps the word "*shu*" [= reciprocity]. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.'<sup>46</sup>

Since not everyone can be rich, being good does not require wealth. A truly humane person realizes that "the good life" is not a result of money or power. A good life is the result of "being good."

The Master said, 'Wealth and high station are what men desire but unless I got them in the right way I would not remain in them. Poverty and low station are what men dislike, but even if I did not get them in the right way I would not try to escape from them.'<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Analects*, 1.6, in Van Voorst, *Anthology of Asian Scriptures*, 177–78.

<sup>44</sup> The idea of a "liberal arts" education is based on the European aristocracy. The "liberal" in "liberal arts" originally meant "free," that is, free from having to do manual labor. Education was primarily for the upper classes, who had time and money to develop "the good life."

<sup>45</sup> Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*, 178.

<sup>46</sup> *Analects* XV.24, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin).

<sup>47</sup> *Analects* IV.5, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin).

It is better to be poor and “good” than rich and “bad.” If one has to cheat or lie in order to become rich, then one should not become rich. If one can avoid poverty only by stealing or hurting people, then it is better to remain poor. A poor person who helps others and works at living a moral life is “superior” to a rich person who thinks only about herself or himself.

However, morality was not meant to be drab or boring. “Benevolence” or “virtue” (*ren*) included practicing the things that gave life beauty and enjoyment.<sup>48</sup>

A human being is not only someone who feels for others, he or she is someone who appreciates beauty and art. A good life is a life that embraces all those things that make us aware that life is beautiful. It is worth living to the full. Confucianism has always emphasized the value of education and humanistic studies.

**Question #1:** *How does compassion for others lead to one developing better character for one’s self? How far does this compassion extend? To animals or plants? (Remember Buddhism and Jainism.) Can compassion ever be counter-productive (do a search for “pathological altruism”)?*

**Question #2:** *How does the study of literature, art, music, etc., make one a better person? Does art have to make one a better person in order to be “good” art? If a piece of art (e.g, a film) is morally bad, is it “bad art”?*

## 7. The “Superior Man”

The ideal person was well-trained in the arts — ritual, music, dance, and calligraphy — and had studied ancient texts. He<sup>49</sup> was a “well-rounded” person. That is, he did not specialize in anything, but was experienced in all aspects of human culture.

Here Confucius expressed the elitist, aristocratic origins of all culture. Art is only possible where there is free time. Free time is made possible by material prosperity. In all societies before the nineteenth century capitalistic west, material prosperity was created either by slaves or peasants. One can see this elitism in the following text:

Fan Ch’ih asked to be taught how to grow crops. The Master said, ‘I am not as good [for that] as an old farmer.’<sup>50</sup>

If one wanted to learn a practical trade like farming (or in modern terms) carpentry, or auto mechanics, then one should go to a farmer, carpenter, or mechanic. The “superior man” didn’t specialize in any one thing. His job was not to provide material prosperity. His job was to give moral and educational leadership to society.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See *Analects* VII.6, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin).

<sup>49</sup> In Confucius’ time, and for all of Chinese history, this ideal person was male, not female. As in the west, the female’s job was to complement and support the male by being faithful in her domestic tasks.

<sup>50</sup> *Analects*, XIII.4, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin).

<sup>51</sup> See the discussion in *Religions of Asia*, ed., Fenton et. al., 171.

When Fan Ch'ih left, the Master said, 'How petty [little] Fan Hsü is! When those above love the rites, none of the common people will dare be irreverent; when they love what is right, none of the common people will dare be insubordinate.... What need is there to talk about growing crops.'<sup>52</sup>

But Confucius was *not* saying that the “superior man” should live a life of ease:

The Master said, 'The gentleman seeks neither a fully belly nor a comfortable home. He is quick in action and cautious in speech. He goes to me possessed of the Way to be put right. Such a man can be described as eager to learn.'<sup>53</sup>

The ideal person, then, was someone who lived simply and without luxury. True learning was not a way of “getting ahead in life,” or living a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. The “superior man” learned in order to discipline himself. He continually “criticized” his behavior and worked to improve it. He judged his life on the basis of “principle.” He based his life on unchanging moral convictions.

**Question:** Does leisure always lead to culture? Why or why not? Are well-educated, “cultured” people always better? How do we account for the antagonism between our culture’s “elite” and “ordinary” people, manifested in the phenomena of Brexit and the Trump candidacy in 2016?

## V. Taoism

### 1. The Tao According to Taoism<sup>54</sup>

#### **Textbook Readings:**

- Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, pp. 196-200; 215–6
- Philip Novak, ed., *The World's Wisdom*, ch. 4: §§ 1–8

As we saw in the earliest forms of Chinese religion, the Tao was the **way or path** of the celestial bodies — the stars, sun, and moon. A harmonious society was formed by determining the Tao of Heaven and following it on earth. Confucius believed that the Tao was by making relationships and social structures right.

But other philosophers disagreed with Confucius. Making the world work better would *not* lead to harmony. Indeed, you should not try to change the world at all. An early example of such a philosopher was the unknown writer (or writers) of *Tao De Jing*.

According to *Tao De Jing*, humanity cannot be improved through struggle and effort. Reality, “the Tao,” includes happiness and suffering. If I didn't have to work for a living to support my

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<sup>52</sup> *Analects*, XIII.4, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin).

<sup>53</sup> *Analects*, I.14 trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin).

<sup>54</sup> In the words “Tao” and “Taoism,” the initial T is pronounced with the sound *duh*. So “Tao” is pronounced as “dowel” and *Tao Te Ching* is “dowel duh jing,” (rhyming with “bing”).

family, I would never know the fulfillment of a job well–done. Just as “light” wouldn’t exist without darkness, pleasure wouldn’t exist without pain.

Part of the problem of society is that people falsely believe they can identify “the good.” They say, “*this* is how to solve the problem.” But according to *Tao De Jing*, no one can identify the Tao.

TAO called TAO is not TAO. / Names can name no lasting name.<sup>55</sup>

Let us say you have chosen to be an atheist. You have decided that you will live and act on the assumption that there is no higher being. This belief may be an understandable response to your own upbringing and experiences. (For example, maybe the god you were taught to believe in did not let you make any of your own decisions. You rejected what you came to believe was a “false” view of god.)

Even so, the view of reality you embraced was only a partial view. You became an atheist in response to your prior experiences. These experiences were unique to you. Another person might have had different experiences and have come to opposite conclusions.

*Tao De Jing* is telling us that *no one view of reality is the whole of reality*. The path that each one of us takes in life is unique to us and partial. So the instant we try to identify truth we have lost it. *All truth is partial truth*. If we say, “this is how we ought to live,” we have told a falsehood. We have tried to “name” the Tao. But in fact we have only named the Tao in our particular situation. We have made a mistake in limiting reality to only one piece of an infinitely larger whole.

Since any specific view of truth is only partially true, we should not work for any particular agenda. Immediately following the above quotation, *Tao Te Ching* continues:

Nameless: the origin of heaven and earth.

Naming: the mother of ten thousand things.

Empty of desire, perceive mystery.

Fill with desire, perceive manifestations.<sup>56</sup>

The ultimate source of everything *is not any one thing*. As in the Upanishads and some forms of Buddhism, reality is *no–thing*. The ultimate source of everything that is (“the Originator”) has no specific identity. It is a dark, indescribable something. Yet everything is “in” it.

Vague and intangible;

Within are entities.

Shadowy and obscure;

Within it there is life.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Tao Te Ching* 1, in *Lao-tzu/Tao Te Ching*, translated by Stephen Addiss & Stanley Lombardo (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1993). “Lao-tzu” is the legendary author of *Tao Te Ching*, and another name for its title. The *Tao Te Ching* is the second most translated work in world literature, next to the Bible. There are many translations on-line that can give the student insights into the possible meanings of any saying.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> *Tao Te Ching* 21, trans. Addiss & Lombardo.

## 2. The only thing lasting is change

There is only one way we know about the Tao. Experiences keep emerging out of its inexhaustible power and infinite depth. We know *something* is there, because we see its products (life in all of its variety). *If* we want to give it a name, we can call it “the Mother of all things.” But we will never discover what *is*.

Something unformed and complete  
Before heaven and earth were born,  
Solitary and silent,  
Stands along and unchanging,  
Pervading all things without limit.  
It is like the mother of all under heaven,  
But I don't know its name—  
Better call it TAO.<sup>58</sup>

The Tao is the constant process of life. The Tao does not change because the *fact of change* does not change. Experiences ebb and flow. Sometimes we are happy, and sometimes we are sad. Sometimes life is full of excitement and anticipation, and sometimes life is empty of zest. But “what goes around comes around.”

The energy that seems to fade one time will return another time. Indeed, the dark and empty experiences of life psychologically prepare us to experience the powerful experiences of life. Pain is the fuel of pleasure.

An example of this principle can be seen in people who win the lottery. They forget that is not *money* that brings excitement, but the *search for money*. Such people often end up being miserable. They have forgotten that the Declaration of Independence does not give us the right to “happiness,” but the “*pursuit* of happiness.”

Life is most full of happiness when we accept pain and loss. We need to see suffering as part of the Tao. The dark and the light sides go together. As we have seen, Yin (dark, femaleness, death) and Yang (light, maleness, life) go together. Yin requires Yang, and Yang requires Yin. When we understand this, we will stop trying to *change* life. We will simply *accept* it.

In other words, life becomes a problem only when we try to *stop* its infinite variety. According to Taoism, Confucianism made this mistake: it tried to *fix* things. In *Tao Te Ching*, the proper response is to simply *allow things to happen*.

**Question:** Suppose we learned that in one month, a large asteroid would collide with the earth and destroy human civilization. Any humans that survived would be “back in the Stone Age”. How would you feel? How would you react?

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<sup>58</sup> *Tao Te Ching* 25, trans. Addiss & Lombardo. In ancient religions of middle Eastern origin, this “formless” origin of everything was known as “chaos.” In Genesis 1, it was called “without form and void.”

### 3. Inhumaneness

One could argue that Taoism has a refreshingly realistic view of life. Instead of getting all worked up over life's injustices, Taoism reminds us to take the bad with the good. Disappointment and loss are the "other side of the coin" of happiness and success.

But the moral price of this view is high. Taoism says that all efforts to "improve" the world or make life easier are wrong. The Tao is not concerned about human beings and our petty concerns. The Tao is "inhumane." I am simply one small part of the great cycle of yin and yang. My happiness doesn't matter to the Tao. It doesn't matter whether I live or die. It doesn't matter whether I am happy or miserable, rich or poor.

This means that all efforts to make society more "just" are misguided. Attempts to free people from oppression will only make society worse. Taoism implies that "morality," as we usually understand it, is a mistake. It criticized Confucius's belief that "superior men" could make improve society.

Don't glorify heroes,  
And people will not contend.<sup>59</sup>

When leaders of society were appointed on the basis of merit, then people began competing. This led to tension and hostility. Some people got left out. In place of natural harmony was the disharmony of politics, elitism, and status.

**Question:** Can a "natural" human society produce harmony and well-being? Should we have a political system built on radical libertarianism—the government is only responsible for protection against external enemies and enforcing contracts between individuals? What are the strengths and weaknesses of such a theory?

### 4. Naturalness

In response, Taoism taught *naturalness*. The idea of naturalness can be understood with the help of some human prehistory. As far as we can tell, the earliest human communities were "hunter-gatherer" societies. They got food by hunting wild animals and collecting fruits that grew naturally, such as berries or nuts.

Somehow, somewhere, some groups learned how to cultivate wheat, barley, or maize (corn). *Cultivation* is an artificial condition. It permits communities to stay in one place and settle down. A group of people can plan on a crop. Because of the increased food supply, the group becomes larger. A larger community requires a more complex organization. It has to learn how to make decisions and find solutions for disagreements.

On the surface, this development might appear like "progress." It is the beginning of civilization as we know it. But it also led to a brand new set of problems — the haves and have-nots, power-struggles, war, slavery, the rise of the domination of society by men.

*Tao Te Ching* said that a natural state of complete simplicity was better than an unnatural state of culture. It wanted small, self-contained communities. People shouldn't travel, since knowledge

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<sup>59</sup> *Tao Te Ching* 3, trans. Addiss & Lombardo.

of other communities encouraged greed and war. Simple farming met the basic needs of people without developing complex societies or sophisticated cultures. There wasn't any need nor motivation for change. People remained content with their own customs and way of life.<sup>60</sup>

The Sage [wise man] rules  
By emptying hearts and filling bellies,  
By weakening ambitions and strengthening bones;  
Leads people  
Away from knowing and wanting;  
Deters those who know too much  
From going too far:....<sup>61</sup>

Taoism and its principle of “naturalness” suggests that if we give up our artificial demands for a “better life,” a higher standard of living, we would be happier. We only need rules of justice when we stop following the Tao, the natural path of life and reality. We only need morality when we create complex societies with competition and greed. “Righteousness” and “filial piety” are man-made efforts to control a man-made problem: human conflict. But human rules create more problems: hypocrisy, *pretending* to be good rather than *really* being good.<sup>62</sup>

If people followed the Tao, they would no longer fight for wealth or power. If all people lived naturally and without desires, we wouldn't need wisdom. People would spontaneously follow the Tao. Societies would go with the flow of nature. Humanity would accept the limits of being human. Instead of trying to defeat death, it would accept the realities of suffering.

Even if one regards the *Tao Te Ching's* solution as unrealistic, there is still something to be learned from the idea of naturalness. Too often we want something, thinking that it will make our life easier. But our desires are drawn into a spiral of ever-increasing greed and dissatisfaction.

A computer has become an essential tool in our lives today. (This book is being written on one.) It's fun for a while, but the thrill wears out. One needs a new gadget to make it interesting. Maybe the latest operating system will help! But that demands more memory, a bigger hard drive, and a faster processor in the computer.

Originally, the purpose of the computer was to save time, but now one *spends* time to keep the machine running smoothly. One spends time on Facebook. One adds “interface” improvements, which conflict with other software. One spends hours tracking down and fixing the problem. And often the fix will be *another* program.

A similar example arises when both adults in the family go to work to earn more money. The result is that they pay more money for food, since eating lunch away from home is more expensive. In the place of inexpensive home-cooked meals, the family eats out more. The parents hire a baby-sitter for young children. Owners of large, lush lawns hire landscaping company to take care of them. Most of the money the parents hoped to save are used up in expenses that would have otherwise been unnecessary.

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<sup>60</sup> Liu Xiaogan, “Taoism,” in *Our Religions*, p. 244.

<sup>61</sup> *Tao Te Ching* 3, trans. Addiss & Lombardo.

<sup>62</sup> See *Tao Te Ching* 18.

**Question:** *If you believe that climate change is a problem, and you want to slow it down, are you willing to pay more for heating? Give up air-conditioning? Buy expensive and inconvenient electric cars (remember: they're dependent on the electric grid—how are you going to produce and pay for more expensive electric)? Fly less?*

*If you answer is “no,” then can you live with the problem of climate change?*

## 5. Non-Action

If people live “naturally,” then how do they act? They act without desire or need. They act spontaneously. They follow the Tao, rather than their wants or reason. They act without attempting to accomplish anything.

The idea of *wu-wei* is usually translated “non-action.” But it is better understood as acting without desire, or acting without making an effort to reach some goal.<sup>63</sup> “Non-action” was the result of being “natural.” The motivation was the Tao, not some personal goal. So when “I” did something, it was really the Tao acting through me. I received neither credit or blame.

The person who engaged in non-action was nothing more than a small part of the great cosmic scheme. There wasn't any element of “self” in her or his action.

Attain complete emptiness,  
Hold fast to stillness.

The ten thousand things stir about;  
I only watch for their going back.<sup>64</sup>

From the viewpoint of the Tao, human beings are no different from animals or plants. All things follow their natural processes — birth, growth, production of new life or fruit, death, decay, and dissolution. So when you act, there is not really a *you*. The patterns of nature, are acting through you. Just as lion instinctively pursues its prey or an animal uses defensive mechanisms to protect itself against being eaten, you respond immediately to the situation.

This implies that “You” are not responsible for “your” actions. Your “mind” reflects life, but doesn't hold onto it. Non-action therefore leads to a self-lessness. You don't force yourself or your will on anything else. You have no plans, no hopes, no fears, no wants, no desires.

Whatever happens, happens. You can't control the world, so why try?

The world is a spiritual vessel  
And cannot be controlled.

.....  
Some go forth, some are led,  
Some weep, some blow flutes,

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<sup>63</sup> Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*, paraphrases it as “‘active nonstriving’ (p. 179).”

<sup>64</sup> *Tao Te Ching* 16, trans. Addiss & Lombardo.

Some become strong, some superfluous,  
Some oppress, some are destroyed.<sup>65</sup>

The Christian version of this idea is (in words attributed to Jesus): “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”<sup>66</sup>

When we try to grasp spiritual meaning by our own efforts, we lose it. Life, meaning, purpose, happiness — whatever name we give it — is only experienced by *not* trying to experience it. It is only as we surrender ourselves, our lives, our destinies to the Tao (or, God, the Buddha, Christ...) that we gain what we most want and desire — a full human life. According to Taoism, this is done through naturalness and acting without desire, without any personal effort on our part.

**Question:** *What do you think a “spiritual vessel” is? Why is it something that cannot be controlled? (It might help you to think about it to ask: what’s the meaning of the last four lines?)*

*Do you agree with the principle summarized in the last paragraph? If so, why does life work that way? If not, what do you think is wrong with it?*

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>66</sup> Matthew 10:39, New Revised Standard Version.

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