

# CLASSICAL EASTERN PHILOSOPHY

From *The History of Philosophy: A Short Survey*

James Fieser

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## A. INTRODUCTION

At the time that ancient Greek philosophy was blossoming, on the other side of the world a different set of philosophical traditions emerged within the Eastern Asian regions of India and China. Like Greece, both of these areas had complex social structures, sophisticated cultures, and, most importantly, systems of writing that enabled people to record their thoughts. But unlike Greek philosophy which was largely secular, Eastern philosophies were intimately tied to their respective religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. Distinguishing Eastern philosophy from its religion is an issue of emphasis: its philosophy deals

less with worship rituals and depictions of the gods, and more with larger questions of our relation to the cosmos.

While the specific elements of the various Eastern philosophies differ dramatically, many share a specific conception of God and the cosmos. Philosophers and theologians of all traditions try to understand how God, or some ultimate reality, relates to the world, and there are two general approaches to this: transcendence and immanence. The *transcendence* approach maintains that God is entirely separate or distinct from the finite world in which we live. When I look at a mountain, a forest or even a human being, I may see these as external objects that God creates, which are not literally part of God himself. God thus transcends or rises above the things in the world, and is beyond even the cosmos itself. To communicate with God, I must look beyond this finite created world and seek God in his secluded realm. A common expression used to depict the transcendent nature of God is that he is "wholly other", and the Western religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam typically depict God in this way. By contrast, the *immanence*, approach is that God is not external to the cosmos, but dwells within it or is immanent to it. Thus, when I look at a mountain, forest of a human being, what I see are literally parts of God. This view is often called *pantheism*, a term literally meaning all-God. On this view, God dwells within me too since I am part of the cosmos. To communicate with God I look within myself, and not outwards to a secluded divine realm beyond the cosmos. Communication with God, then, involves a mystical experience by which I become aware of my union with God. Eastern religious traditions in general gravitate towards this pantheistic notion of God.

## **B. HINDU PHILOSOPHY**

The best place to begin examining Eastern Philosophy is by looking at Hinduism. Hindu texts are among the oldest in the East, and their concepts directly or indirectly influenced the philosophy of other Eastern philosophical traditions. While many of the world's religious traditions were founded by renown people (Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad) Hinduism has no founding figure, and it covers a diversity of views of the people of India dating as far back as 3,500 BCE. The term "Hindu" comes from the Persian word "Hind," which was the name given to the Indus River region of northern India. Most generally, "Hinduism" means the religion of the Indus River region. Early Hindu religion was polytheistic, similar to the religion in ancient Greece and Rome. Their sacred text is a large work called the *Vedas*, which literally means "bodies of knowledge," written between 1,500-800 BCE in the ancient language Sanskrit. It describes features of various gods, rituals to appease them, and hymns to chant to them. Hindu philosophical discussions emerged shortly after, from around 800 BCE to 200 CE., emphasizing the pantheistic notion of the divine reality that permeates the cosmos. The Hindu name for this reality is the *Atman-Brahman*, literally meaning the *Self-God*, and much of Hindu philosophy focuses on this concept.

### **The Self-God**

The dramatic implication of the notion of the Self-God is that *I am the God of the cosmos*. At first glance this may sound strange or even delusional, but classical Hindu philosophers provide an explanation. The *Atman* is our *true* Self that lies at the inner core of our human identities, and it is only this inner core that is identical with God. Hindus sometimes use an analogy of an onion to describe the various layers of our identities. Like an onion with many layers of skin, our human identities also have different layers. The outer layers of our identities involve common

sense views of ourselves that we experience empirically, such as our individual physical bodies, sensations, thoughts and feelings. The Self-God is like the inner core of the onion, hidden beneath many distracting layers, and consequently we fail to immediately comprehend the very existence of that inner core and our divine status. Instead, we see ourselves as distinct beings, each of us with our own bodies and minds, and we see the world itself as consisting of a multiplicity of isolated parts. By peeling away the outer layers of our identities, though, we will find the Self-God within each of us and see the underlying unity of the world.

The doctrine of the Self-God was put forward in two specific Hindu works: *The Upanishads* and *The Bhagavad Gita*. The *Upanishads* is a series of more than 200 anonymously-written texts, although Hindu tradition gives special emphasis to only about 18 early ones composed between 600 and 400 BCE. In one of the most famous of these, a father picturesquely describes to his son how things that seem diverse in fact have an underlying common reality. Plants, animals, humans, and everything else are united in the Self-God that exists beneath the physical structure of things. Take, for example, how bees collect juices from a variety of trees and unify those juices in their honey:

Bees make honey by collecting the juices of distant trees and reducing the juices into one form. These juices have no discrimination and do not say “I am the juice of this tree or that tree.” In the same manner, when all these creatures merge with Being [either in deep sleep or in death], they do not know that they merged with Being. Whatever these creatures are here — whether a lion, a wolf, a boar, a worm, a fly, a gnat, or a mosquito — they become that again and again. Everything that exists has as its soul that which is the finest essence. It is Reality. It is the Atman, and *you are that*, my son. [*Chandogya Upanishad*]

This passage makes a distinction between our physical identities and our underlying true identities. Our physical identities go through continual cycles of reincarnation; this is so of animal life as well as human life. Our true underlying identities, though, merge with God, which is undifferentiated reality. The father says to his son, “You are that,” meaning that his son is the Self-God that he’s describing (*Tat Tvam Asi* in the Sanskrit language). According to later Hindu tradition, this phrase “You are that,” as spoken by the father, encapsulates the message of all the *Upanishads*.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, or *Song of God*, is a 100-page section of an epic poem called the *Mahabharata*. At about 5,000 pages and composed over an 800 year period, the *Mahabharata* is the world’s longest epic poem. It chronicles a legendary feud between two branches of a royal family. The long-standing quarrel culminates in a bloody battle. The story behind the *Bhagavad Gita* focuses on prince Arjuna, the leader on one side of the feud, who is despairing about going into battle against his kinfolk. He expresses his grief to his charioteer, Krishna, who, it turns out, is the manifestation of the Hindu god Vishnu in human form. Krishna comforts Arjuna with a philosophy lesson about discovering the Self-God within him:

Those who distinguish between the slayer and the slain are ignorant of them both. No one slays, and no one is slain. No one is born, and no one dies. No one who once existed, ceases to exist. They are unborn, perpetual, eternal and ancient, and are not slain when their bodies are slaughtered. If we understand a person to be indestructible, perpetual, unborn, undiminishing, how can that person slay, or be slain? [*Bhagavad Gita*, Sect. 2]

Krishna's point is that we are all eternal by virtue of the Self-God within us, and what happens to our bodies is insignificant. For this reason, Arjuna should not worry about the conflict with his relatives since even if their bodies die in battle, their inner selves are untouched.

### **Release from Rebirth**

Hindus have a long tradition of belief in reincarnation, which, most simply, is the view that one's present life is followed by a series of new lives in new physical bodies. There are two components to rebirth. First, there is the basic process of rebirth itself: when I die, my true Self will be reborn into another body, and when that body dies, I will be reborn into another, and so on. The *Bhagavad Gita* picturesquely states "As a person throws off worn-out garments and takes new ones, so too the dweller in the body throws off worn-out bodies and enters into others that are new" (*Bhagavad Gita*, 2). Some Hindu writings are explicit about the mechanics of the rebirth process. When I die, and my body is cremated, my soul rises with the smoke and travels through the heavens for several months. My soul then falls back to earth, mixes with natural elements, and is consumed by humans. From there my soul works its way into a man's semen, and, through intercourse, enters a woman's womb.

The second component of rebirth is that the moral consequences of my behavior in this life are carried over to my next lives. Known as the doctrine of *karma* (or "action") the quality of my existence in my new life is largely a function of my good or bad actions in my present and previous lives. To illustrate, imagine that my true Self carries around a karma pouch from one life to another. Each time I perform a good deed, a good-karma token is tossed into the pouch, and when I perform a bad deed, a bad-karma token is thrown in. When I die, I carry the karma pouch and all its tokens on to the next life. If I have an abundance of good-karma tokens, then in my next life I may be healthier, wealthier, and more spiritually mature than I am now. On the other hand, if I die with an abundance of bad-karma tokens, then I may be reborn sickly, poor, and ignorant. To make my next life better, I should do what I can in this life to accumulate as many good-karma tokens as possible.

While we might think of reincarnation as a good thing, it is instead something that we should dread for it places us in a seemingly endless cycle of struggles. We need to do what we can to become *released* (*moksha*) from the rebirth cycle. Hindu writings stress several approaches to release, two of which are especially dominant. The first approach is that release is a matter of accumulating a great abundance of good karma over our various lives. When I get as good as I can possibly be, then the rebirth process is over and my true Self remains with God. The appeal of this approach is that it underscores the fact that life is a moral journey, with perfection as our ultimate goal. The second approach to release involves discovering the Self-God within me through reflection and meditation. The appeal of this approach is that I can go more directly towards my final goal and experience the pure Self-God right *here and now*. Both of these approaches, though, are interconnected. Before I'm capable of reflectively experiencing the Self-God within me, I must first be morally mature. If I rob a bank this morning, I stand little chance of discovering the Self-God within me this afternoon, no matter how hard I meditate. Developing that moral maturity might require that I go through several more reincarnations until my karma pouch is filled with good tokens, at which time I'll be a better person and be more successful at meditating.

### **Yoga**

It is one thing for me to merely understand the concept of the Self-God as a philosophical theory about the cosmos, but it is an entirely other for me to actually discover the Self-God within me. To assist believers in this task, Hindu tradition developed a series of Yoga techniques. The term *Yoga* literally means “to yoke” or “to harness,” but its more general meaning is to discipline oneself. The *Bhagavad Gita* is something like a handbook of the various Yoga methods, and we will look it its account of two of them.

The first of these is the Yoga of *selfless action (karma)*, which involves routinely behaving with indifference to the fruits of our actions. By engaging in pure action, unconcerned with the action’s results, we distance ourselves from the outer layers of our identities and our perceptions of the world. We thus become more sensitive to the reality of the Self-God. Suppose, for example, that it is lunchtime and I make a sandwich. Ordinarily, I do this to ward off hunger pangs, to satisfy my food craving, to keep me healthy, or to keep me alive. All of these reasons, though, emphasize the outer layers of my identity: my bodily cravings, my desires, and the continuation of my finite life. This all distracts me from my true inner Self. I should continue make and eat the sandwich as I usually do, but at the same time I should train myself to disassociate my identity from the act of eating, and view that act impartially as though someone else is eating. Since all my daily actions focus on my outer self, the Yoga of selfless action helps train me to disassociate myself from *everything* that I do. When distractions of my outer layers are finally removed, and I then have some hope of experiencing the glimmer of my true inner Self. This also brings me one step closer to ending the cycle of reincarnation: “By renouncing the fruit of one’s actions, the person who is endowed with intellect is freed from the bond of birth and goes to the place that is devoid of illness” (*Bhagavad Gita*, 2). I am locked into my physical body as long as I enjoy the results of my activities, and I need an evenness of mind to give up the fruits of my actions which the Yoga of selfless action provides.

According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, we will not reach this degree of indifference in our actions by following traditional customs in sacred texts: “Scriptures prescribe many ceremonies to attain pleasure and power, but rebirth is the fruit of those actions” (ibid). Like eating a sandwich, we perform religious rituals for a purpose; in this case, the purpose is to appease God or to get to heaven. However, religious actions are no less distracting than any other action. There are clear psychological indicators when we disassociate ourselves from our actions, namely, we are freed from all emotions and attachments:

When a person abandons all the desires of his heart and is satisfied in the Self and by the Self, then he is called “stable in mind.” A sage of stable mind is free from anxiety when surrounded by pains, is indifferent when surrounded by pleasures, and is freed from passion, fear and anger. He is without attachments on every side, whether desirable or undesirable, and neither likes nor dislikes. The person of understanding is well poised. Just as a tortoise pulls in all its limbs, the sage withdraws his senses from the objects, and his understanding is well poised. [Ibid]

The analogy of the tortoise in the final sentence explains the benefit of freeing ourselves from emotions and attachments. Through detachment, we withdraw from the world of the senses, which in turn enables us to internally focus on the Self-God.

A second type of Yoga discussed in the *Bhagavad Gita* is that of *meditation (raja)*, which involves immediately experiencing our union with God through contemplation. The practice of meditation requires a disciplined effort, and to that end the *Bhagavad Gita* provides

step-by-step instructions. When attempting meditation, we should first find a private spot, assume a seated posture, gaze ahead, subdue our thoughts and senses, and lose self-consciousness. Through this method, we directly experience the unified Self-God within us:

The Yogi should constantly engage himself in Yoga, staying in a secret place by himself, subduing his thoughts and Self, and freeing himself from hope and greed. He should set up a fixed seat for himself in a pure place, which is neither too high, nor too low, made of a cloth, a black deerskin, and grass, one over the other. Once there he should practice Yoga for the purification of the Self; he should make his mind one-pointed, subduing his thoughts and the functions of his senses. He should hold his body, head and neck erect, immovably steady, looking at the point of his nose with an unseeing gaze. His heart should be serene, fearless and firm in the vow of renunciation. His mind should be controlled as he sits in harmony. In this manner he will think on me and aspire after me. [Ibid, 6]

The point of all these steps in the meditative process is to block out distractions. Imagine that you are in a room with 50 radios playing, all tuned to different channels, and in the back of the room a cat is meowing. The only way to hear the cat is to first shut off all the radios, one by one. Similarly, the meditative techniques guide us in successively shutting down the commotion of ordinary consciousness so that we can experience our inner Selves.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna and Arjuna discuss some of the pitfalls of the Yoga of meditation. Krishna says that this meditation method is not for everyone, but only for those who can avoid extremes in their conduct and desires:

Yoga is not for the person who eats too much or too little, or who sleeps too much or too little. Yoga kills all pain for the person who is moderate in eating, amusement, performing actions, sleeping, and waking. When his subdued thought is fixed on the Self and free from desiring things, then we can say that he is harmonized. Just as a lamp in a windless place does not flicker, so too will the subdued thought of the Yogi be absorbed in the Yoga of the self. . . . The Yogi who harmonizes the self and puts away evil, will enjoy the infinite bliss of unity with the eternal God. The self, harmonized by Yoga, sees the Self abiding in all beings, and all beings in the Self. Everywhere he sees the same thing. [Ibid]

Thus, if we succeed in being moderate, then we will see the unity of the Self in everything. In response to Krishna, Arjuna objects that some people's minds are so restless that it is impossible to bring it under control as Krishna advises. Krishna replies that through practice and the subduing of our passions we may successfully restrain our thoughts; this underscores the challenge in bringing our Self under control, and why we may appropriately refer to Yoga as a "discipline." Pressing the issue, Arjuna asks what will happen to the person who attempts the Yoga of Meditation, but fails. Krishna responds that, even if you fail at the Yoga of Meditation in your current incarnation, through good deeds you may eventually be reincarnated as a Yogi who finally succeeds at meditation. "In this reborn state, he retains the characteristics belonging to his previous body, and with these he again works for perfection" (ibid).

## **Vedanta: Monism**

In philosophy, monism is the view that the universe is composed of only *one* type of thing, and Hinduism as a whole tends to be monistic, with its pantheistic conception of God enveloping everything. Beginning in the eighth-century CE, the issue of monism was debated by a group of philosophers within Hinduism's *Vedanta* tradition, which drew its inspiration directly from the *Upanishads*. The debate started with the views of a scholar named Sankara (788-820 CE). Philosophically, there are two ways that we can understand the notion of monism. The first, which we will call *weak monism*, is the view that the universe consists of one basic thing, but that thing is divided into sub-units. An orange, for example, is a unified whole insofar as it is a self-contained biological unit. However, the orange clearly has parts to it, such as its outer peel, inner sections, and seeds. Thus, it is a monistic whole that consists of parts. The second kind of monism, which we will call *strong monism*, is the view that the universe consists of one undifferentiated thing that has no sub-units. A cannon ball, for example, is composed of a single metallic stuff through and through, and has no obvious internal parts that differentiate it. When reflecting on the monistic themes in the *Upanishads*, Sankara had to decide between interpreting them as weak monism or strong monism. He took the *Upanishad's* notion of unity literally and went with strong monism. In the chapter on the Presocratics, we've seen that this is the approach that Parmenides takes with his conception of the One: a single thing with no parts.

There are dramatic implications to strong monism. If reality as a whole is the single, unchanging God, then there is something unreal about our commonsense perception that the world has parts. That is, as I look around me, I visually perceive a world that is composed of distinct elements, such as houses, mountains, and rocks. Also, I ordinarily see myself as a distinct thing from the people and objects that surround me. For Sankara, all of these commonsense perceptions are unreal, and the truth of the matter is that beneath these commonsense perceptions is the underlying unity of God beneath the unreal appearance of things. In the following, Sankara argues that individual selves and the world of appearances are unreal. The only reality is the unchanging, undifferentiated God, in spite of how things seem from our common sense perspective. He makes this point here using the analogy of a rope that mistakenly appears to be a snake:

When accepted as the doctrine of the *Vedas*, this doctrine of the individual soul having its Self in God does away with the independent existence of the individual soul. This is just as the idea of the rope does away with the idea of the snake [for which the rope had been mistaken]. And if the doctrine of the independent existence of the individual soul has to be set aside, then the view of the entire phenomenal world having an independent existence must likewise be set aside insofar as it is based on the individual soul.  
[*Commentary on the Vedanta Sutra* 2.1.14]

As Sankara suggests above, suppose that when walking down the road I see a snake. On closer inspection, though, it is not a snake at all, but only a rope. In the same way, the world deceptively appears differentiated, but on closer inspection it is undifferentiated. There is an unreality to how we ordinarily perceive the world as having parts.

According to Sankara, the strong monistic view of the world is embedded in the famous phrase from the *Upanishads* "You are that":

everything has its Self in God, [and so] the whole world of appearances is non-existent, including actions, agents, and consequences of actions. Nor can it be said that this non-

existence of the phenomenal world is declared by Scripture to be limited to certain states. For the passage “You are that” shows that the general fact of God being the Self of all is not limited by any particular state. [Ibid]

For Sankara, this means that *all* (not just some) elements of the world of appearances are unreal. Thus, the tree I see in front of me may seem to be there, but it is actually unreal. Similarly, although I myself seem to be a real physical person that performs actions, this component of me is unreal too. Why, though, do I perceive the world of appearances in this illusory and deceptive way? According to Sankara, this deception is caused by a force called *Maya* (literally "illusion"), sort of like a magician who has the ability to create illusions. It shields us from knowledge of the true nature of God, and makes me think that the illusory world of appearances is real. My goal, then, is to overcome this ignorance and see the undifferentiated nature of God as it truly is.

A rival Vedanta scholar named Ramanuja (1017–1137 CE) rejected strong monism in favor of the theory of weak monism, and here’s why. Suppose that Sankara’s strong monism is correct. That is, suppose that the only thing that exists in the universe is a single, unchanging and undifferentiated God. Anything else that I think exists is a matter of deception. A consequence of this is that it makes no sense at all for me to worship God. First, if God is completely without parts, then God has no personality and is much like a huge glob of clay. There’s no point in worshipping that kind of thing. Second, if my true inner Self is this God, then by worshipping God I am worshipping myself, which also seems silly. Third, any acts of worship that I perform, such as prayer, sacrifice, or charity, would be part of the world of appearances. But the world of appearances is not real, so any acts of worship I perform would also be unreal. Strong monism, then, undermines the whole notion of religious worship; thus, Ramanuja concludes, we must reject it in favor of weak monism.

According to Ramanuja’s weak monism, although the world is unified in a single God, God has differentiated parts. Like the different internal parts of a single orange, individual souls and the physical world make up the body of God. So, we are in one sense united with God, but in another we are distinct from God. This approach rescues the world of appearances, which Sankara rejected as unreal. For Ramanuja, when I perceive various houses, mountains and rocks around me, they are all real parts of God. When I distinguish between my own personal identity and other beings around me, I am again perceiving a genuine distinction within God. This approach also rescues the meaningfulness of religious worship. Since I am only a small component of God, it is reasonable for me to show devotion to the totality of God.

To make his point, Ramanuja offers his own interpretation of the phrase “You are that” from the *Upanishads*:

The words “That” and “You” denote a God distinguished by difference. The word “that” refers to God as omniscient, etc., which had been introduced as the general topic of consideration in previous passages of the same section, such as “It thought, may I be many.” The word “you,” which stands in relation to “that,” conveys the idea of God insofar as its body consists of the individual souls connected with non-intelligent matter. [*Commentary on the Vedanta Sutra*, 1.1.1]

According to Ramanuja, the terms “That” and “You” clearly have different meanings, and so there is some difference within God which allows me and the world of appearances to have distinct existences, even though they are all unified within God.

## C. BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

Buddhism was founded in India by a former Hindu monk named Gautama Siddhartha (563-483 BCE), better known as *Buddha*, a term which means the “enlightened one.” Buddha came from a wealthy family in what is now the country of Nepal, where his father was a feudal lord. The night before he was born his mother dreamed that a white elephant entered her womb through her side. Hindu priests interpreted the dream as a dual destiny: he would either be a universal monarch, or universal teacher. Hoping that his son would take the path of a monarch, his father confined him to the family estate, sheltering him from the ugly experiences of illness and death. At age 29, he had three occasions to glimpse the outside world, and each time he was shocked to learn about the suffering that humans experience. First he saw an old man, then a sick man, and then a dead body. On a fourth occasion he saw a Hindu monk, which inspired him to leave his family estate to pursue a life of religious devotion. Buddha wandered for six years, learning what he could from holy people about the solution to the human predicament. He joined a band of five ascetic monks who taught him the practice of self-renunciation. So austere were Buddha’s efforts, though, that he almost died of starvation. He started eating again to regain health, and his ascetic colleagues left him in disgust. Disheartened by his failures, Buddha sat under a fig tree, vowing to not rise until he achieved supreme awakening. He stayed up all night, and at the first glimpse of the morning star he became enlightened. He eventually drew a large crowd of followers and set up monasteries in every major city. Buddha eventually died by accidentally eating poisoned mushrooms at the home of a close disciple.

Through his early experiences as a monk, Buddha became dissatisfied with many traditional Hindu teachings, such as the role of the priests and the authority of their scriptures. Nevertheless, Buddha’s underlying philosophy draws heavily from Hinduism, and one contemporary scholar has gone so far as to say that Buddhism is Hinduism stripped for export. Buddha himself wrote nothing, and the oldest accounts of his teachings are in a voluminous collection called the *Pali Canon*, compiled during the first five centuries after Buddha’s death. The texts are written in a language related to Sanskrit, called “Pali”, hence the designation “*Pali Canon*.”

### Four Noble Truths

The most famous part of the *Pali Canon* is a section known as “The First Discourse,” which, according to tradition, Buddha delivered to his ascetic friends immediately after his enlightenment. The content of the discourse is the foundation of all Buddhist teaching. The discourse presents “four noble truths” concerning the quest for enlightenment. The first truth is that life is *suffering*:

Now this is the noble truth concerning suffering. Birth is attended with pain, decay is painful, disease is painful, and death is painful. Union with the unpleasant is painful, and separation from the pleasant is painful. Any craving that is unsatisfied is also painful. In brief, the five components which spring from attachment are painful. This then is the noble truth concerning suffering. [*Samyutta-nikaya*, 56.2]

The Pali word for suffering is sometimes translated as *anxiety* or *frustration*, but a good description is *dislocation*. For example the pain that I experience from a dislocated shoulder is

the result of my arm being yanked out of its normal position. Similarly, the root of all suffering involves some twisting or distortion of our true nature. A poignant illustration of suffering is the birth process. From the moment we come into the world as infants, we find suffering. With each contraction the mother is gripped with perhaps the greatest physical pain that she will experience in life, while anxious friends and relatives stand by helplessly. Physically contorted as it emerges, the baby is forced to cry so that it may begin breathing. Once giving birth, the mother remains in pain for some time, and the frail baby requires continual monitoring at the risk of dying. Buddhist writings offer an endless list of suffering that we experience throughout our lives, such as that from sickness, old age, fear of death, failure to fulfill ambitions, separation from loved ones, and association with people we dislike. Even on a good day, if we can escape some actual human tragedy, our lives are nevertheless dominated by preemptively avoiding suffering. We monitor our diets, struggle to keep up with an exercise routine, cautiously drive around town, lock our doors, and stay clear of hostile people.

The second noble truth is that the cause of suffering is *desire*:

Now this is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering. It is that thirst or craving which causes the renewal of existence, accompanied by sensual delight, and the seeking of satisfaction first here, then there. That is to say, it is the craving for the gratification of the passions, or the craving for a future life, or the craving for success in this present life. This then is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering. [Ibid]

The above quote describes desire as an insatiable craving for private fulfillment. We cling or grasp to virtually anything that might satisfy our yearnings, much like a child that jealously clutches a favorite toy. Ultimately, our cravings can never be truly satisfied, and so we suffer, as a child does when we attempt to wrench a toy from his hands. The central point of this noble truth is that for *every* type of suffering we experience, there is some misguided craving that is at its source. Suppose, for example, that my leg gets broken in a car accident on my way to the store. Chronologically, I had several desires that led up to the accident. One desire impelled me to buy a car to begin with, rather than take public transportation. Another desire inclined me to purchase something at the store, and yet another had me go shopping at that particular time. Further, once I'm at home in my leg cast, lying in bed, my present desires perpetuate my suffering. I want to go back to work, but I can't. I'd like to go to a restaurant, but I can't. I'd prefer to walk around outside but I can't. The more things that I desire and cling to, the more I increase my suffering. Why are we driven to cling so ferociously to so many things? Buddha has an answer. Desire arises from five distinct *components* of our human nature. These components are matter, sensation, perception, predisposition, and consciousness. Each of these five components has me rely on something outside of me. Even if I want to do something as simple as walk from the living room into the kitchen, I rely on the material construction of the house itself, my raw sense perception of it, and how these perceptions automatically register in my mind. Since the human condition is shaped by desire, many if not most of which go unfulfilled, then our condition is one of suffering.

The third noble truth is that the end of suffering is achieved by extinguishing our desire; this is the state of *nirvana*, a term that literally means "to extinguish." Of the virtually endless number of desires that bubble up from my five components, my goal should be the destruction of these, as Buddha describes here:

Now this is the noble truth concerning the elimination of suffering [i.e., the attainment of nirvana]. It is the destruction of this very thirst, in which no passion remains. It is the laying aside of, the getting rid of, the being free from, and the harboring no longer of this thirst. This, then, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of suffering. [Ibid]

In this passage Buddha depicts nirvana as a state in which “no passion remains.” We all understand the importance of eliminating at least *some* desires, such as the desire for unhealthy foods. But the idea here is that we should extinguish *all* desires, and this will bring on a mental state of enlightenment.

The fourth noble truth tells us how to extinguish our desires, namely, by adopting a series of moral attitudes, beliefs, and actions, which Buddha collectively calls the *eightfold path*: “This is the noble truth concerning the *path* that leads to the elimination of suffering. It is the noble eightfold path.” Briefly, these are the eight recommendations. (1) We should adopt *right views* that are free from superstition or delusion. (2) We should have *right aims* that are high and worthy of the intelligent and earnest person. (3) We should practice *right speech*, which is kindly, open, and truthful. (4) We should perform *right conduct* that is peaceful, honest, and pure. (5) We should adopt a *right livelihood* that brings no harm or danger to living things. (6) We should put forth the *right effort* in self-training and self-control. (7) We should have *right mindfulness* insofar as we are fully aware of the present moment and not preoccupied with hopes or worries. (8) We should engage in *right concentration*, which involves proper meditation that leads to the nirvana experience.

On the surface, the eightfold path endorses many of the values that we’ve been taught to adopt since childhood. In fact, these eight recommendations appear integral to simply conducting our normal desire-filled lives in a civilized manner. How, then, do these recommendations lead to nirvana, the extinguishing of all desires? Buddha’s explanation is that they all involve adopting a *Middle Way*, which is the calm detachment achieved by avoiding the extremes of asceticism and self-indulgence:

There are two extremes, fellow monks, which a holy person should avoid: the habitual practice of ... self-indulgence, which is vulgar and profitless ... and the habitual practice of self-mortification, which is painful and equally profitless. There is a middle path discovered by the Buddha – a path which opens the eyes and bestows understanding which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, and to Nirvana. Truly, it is the noble eightfold path. [Ibid]

For each of the recommendations in the eightfold path, we can see how we must follow a middle course. For example, with the first path of right aims, I should strive to be free from superstition and delusion. If we look at common superstitions and delusions today, such as belief in alien abduction or racial superiority, these are clearly extremist views that we should steer clear of. This middle course “opens the eyes and bestows understanding,” which eventually leads to nirvana. The Middle Path is a stepping-stone towards nirvana insofar as it creates a mental disposition, which in turn enables us to be receptive to the nirvana experience.

### **Improper Questions and the No-Self Doctrine**

Philosophers and theologians worldwide devote much attention to speculative issues that cannot be easily demonstrated. What is God’s nature? How did the world come about? Is there life after

death? What kind of existence can I expect to have in the afterlife? In fact, many religions feel that their main mission is to give decisive answers to these questions and convey their answers to as many people as they can. We readily recognize that some religious speculations are superfluous to the central aim of religion – for example, speculations about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Where, though, do we draw the line between the superfluous and essential? The starting point is to determine what in fact is the main goal of religion. Buddha's single complaint about the formal religion of his time was that its rituals and speculations detracted from religion's main goal, namely, enlightenment.

Buddha makes this point in a dialogue with a student. The student, who has heard Buddha teach for some time, is puzzled that Buddha apparently ignores a number of issues that philosophers commonly address. Foremost among these are whether the world is eternal and whether there is life after death. In response, Buddha says that he refuses to discuss these topics since they do not help attain enlightenment. In the passage below, he uses an analogy to explain his resistance to these questions. If someone is shot with a poisoned arrow, his main concern should be to have his wound treated, and not to inquire after details about his attacker's social caste:

Suppose that a man had been wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison. When friends and relatives went to procure for him a physician, suppose the sick man said, "I will not have this arrow taken out until I have learned whether the man who wounded me belonged to the warrior caste, priestly caste, worker caste, or servant caste." Or again, suppose he said, "I will not have this arrow taken out until I have learned the name of the man who wounded me, and to what clan he belongs." . . . That man would die without ever having learned these things. Suppose similarly someone said "I will not lead the religious life under the Buddha until he explained to me that the world is eternal or not eternal ... or that the saint exists or does not exist after death." That person too would die before the Buddha ever explained this to him. [*Majjhima-Nikaya*, 63]

Buddha continues arguing that speculations on such things do not address the basic problem of the human condition. We are in a state of seemingly endless suffering, and the only way to overcome this is to extinguish our desires. Ultimately, these are the truths that matter:

I have not explained that the world is eternal, ... that the world is not eternal, ... and that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death. And why have I not explained this? Because this does not profit us, it has nothing to do with the fundamentals of religion, and does not tend to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, calm, the supernatural faculties, supreme wisdom, and nirvana. ... And what have I explained? Misery, the origin of misery, the cessation of misery, and the path leading to the cessation of misery. And why have I explained this? Because this does profit and concerns the fundamentals of religion. [Ibid]

Accordingly, Buddha distinguishes between essential and nonessential religious speculations on the basis of whether they bring about the end of suffering through nirvana.

Buddha's resistance to nonessential speculations is seen clearly in how he addresses the issue of personal identity, and questions like "Do I exist?" and "What does my self consist of?" My commonsense notion of my conscious self is that it is a fixed and permanent feature of my

identity. Just as my arms and legs are features of my body, my consciousness is a feature of my non-physical self. As I travel through life, a conscious part of me receives new experiences through my senses, reflects on them, recalls other experiences from my memory, and has me act out in a variety of ways. There is always some permanent *me* that is watching, thinking, and acting. However, Buddha denies the meaningfulness of such notions of the self, a position known as the *no-self* doctrine. He explains that our ordinary notion of the self consists of five components or aggregates, namely, matter, sensation, perception, predisposition, and consciousness. However, if we examine each of these one by one, we will see that they cannot be the foundation of a permanent self. For example, sensations come and go in rapid succession and are far too fleeting to have any permanence. One moment I'm having a pleasant sensation, the next moment a painful one. The other four components of the self are equally temporary and changing. In the end, there is not a shred of permanence to be found in the self, and all that these five components will give us is suffering:

When a follower hears and sees this, he will find suffering in matter, suffering in sensation, suffering in perception, suffering in predisposition, suffering in consciousness. [Samyutta Nikaya 22:59]

By rejecting this common notion of the self and its five components, we thereby free ourselves of suffering associated with it. Embracing the no-self doctrine is thus integral to the very act of nirvana, which has us extinguish our identities and frees us from suffering.

### **Doctrine of Dependent Origination**

The Hindu law of karma maintains that our actions have moral consequences that will affect us either in this life or in a reincarnated life. The mental image we might have of this Hindu position is that an invisible supreme judge watches us and tallies up our good and bad deeds. He then appropriately rewards or punishes us as time permits, and, if time runs out in this life, then he carries the rewards and punishments over to the next life. Buddha rejected this particular picture of the doctrine of karma. There are no mysterious tally sheets with our names on them. However, Buddha does not *completely* reject the notion of karma, but instead gives it an earthly-grounded interpretation. According to Buddha, all events that take place are the result of precise causal chains of events. When I trace back the series of causes of any given unfortunate event, I find that it causally rests upon my desire, and, ultimately, on an unjustified concept I have of my conscious self. This notion of causal connectedness is called the *doctrine of dependent origination*.

In a dialogue from the Pali Canon, one of Buddha's followers claims to have a perfectly clear conception of the doctrine of dependent origination. Buddha, though, is not impressed and explains how complicated the notion really is:

Dependent origination appears complicated and is indeed complex. It is through not understanding and penetrating this doctrine that humankind is accordingly like an entangled twist, an ensnared web, or like jumbled grass. It fails to disengage itself from punishment, suffering, destruction, and rebirth. [*Digha-nikaya 256, Mahanidana sutta*]

In the final sentence Buddha suggests that misconceptions about punishment owe to our failure to grasp true causal connections. Suppose, for example, that my friend gets injured in an

automobile accident shortly after he and I visited with each other. I might then feel partly responsible for the accident because our visit lasted too long, which put him in the wrong place at the wrong time. I might then expect to receive some karmic punishment for my role. However, I may have a more realistic view of my responsibility if I better understand all of the causal forces at work in the accident, particularly the mental states of those involved as well as the long string of sorrowful consequences that follow from the accident.

We know from the first two Noble Truths that desire is the ultimate cause of suffering. According to Buddha, the doctrine of dependent origination allows us to explain the connecting links between desire and suffering in very precise terms. Focusing on the suffering associated with old age and death, Buddha traces these back to their initial sources:

If one asks whether old age and death depend on anything, the reply should be that old age and death depend on birth. . . . birth depends on existence . . . existence depends on attachment . . . attachment depends on desire . . . desire depends on sensation . . . sensation depends on contact . . . contact depends on mental and physical phenomena . . . physical phenomena depend on consciousness. [Ibid]

Human consciousness, then, kicks off the entire series of causal events that results in the suffering from old age and death. The successive links are these:

consciousness > mental and physical phenomena > contact > sensation > desire > attachment > existence > birth > old age and death.

To attack the problem at its source, we should subdue our consciousness, and this is the message of the third noble truth, namely, to extinguish all desire through nirvana.

### **Emptiness and Zen Buddhism**

Around 100 CE, Buddhism split into two main denominations, Theravada and Mahayana. While Theravadists held fast to the teachings of the Pali Canon, Mahayanists argued that Buddha's more advanced teachings were transmitted orally and ultimately recorded in later Mahayana texts. A running theme within these new Mahayana works is the notion of *emptiness*, the view that all reality is devoid of any discernable content or description. The view here is not a nihilistic denial that reality exists; instead, it is a denial that reality has any describable distinctions. The metaphor of *emptiness* presumes that there is something like a container that has nothing in it. The container, in this case, has a label on it that reads "reality". But is the container literally empty in the sense that nothing at all exists within it? No. It is one thing to say that reality is not as it initially appears, and it is another to say simply that nothing exists. The point of the metaphor is this: when we look inside the container we find that it has no distinguishable parts or qualities that define its true nature. It is for all practical purposes empty, but there is still some characterless thing in the container.

One anonymously written Mahayana text, the *Heart Sutra*, pushes the notion of emptiness to its extreme. It starts by maintaining that everything about our identities and the ordinary world we live in are empty and have no true content. However, the author continues with the more radical claim that even the four noble truths and nirvana are empty:

There is no knowledge, no ignorance, or no destruction of knowledge. There is no decay and death, or no destruction of decay and death. There are no [four noble truths, namely,] pain, the origin of pain, the elimination of pain, and the path to it. There is no knowledge, no obtaining, no not obtaining of nirvana. [*Heart Sutra*]

It's not enough to merely concede that the ordinary realm of life and death are empty of descriptive content. What's more important is that nirvana, the very solution to our misery, also has no descriptive content. Why is this so dramatic? We've seen that Buddhist teachings in the *Pali Canon* make a fundamental distinction between (a) the ordinary realm of life, death and suffering, and, (b) the realm of nirvana in which suffering is extinguished. But the point of the *Heart Sutra* is that even this distinction is not justified. Stated most forcefully, the ordinary realm and the nirvana realm are the same thing; that is, the world itself does not change when viewing it in nirvana. The entirety of reality is one huge empty thing that is incapable of distinction or descriptive content.

Grasping the notion of emptiness is a genuine challenge, and one branch of Mahayana Buddhism devised an innovative method for conveying the idea. Founded in China around the fifth-century CE, Zen Buddhism is famous for its paradoxical meditative puzzles, such as "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" Zen resists any verbal formula, and has no creeds. The focus of Zen is experience, and rational discourse and doctrine play no role in gaining enlightenment. In Zen, the experience of enlightenment is transmitted from the mind of a seasoned teacher to the student in training. It is sometimes compared to a flame that is passed from candle to candle.

The Zen approach is based on one of Buddha's discourses known as the Flower Sermon, in which he simply held up a golden lotus flower. No one in the crowd understood Buddha's cryptic meaning except his leading disciple. The historical origin of Zen is attributed to a possibly fictitious figure named Bodhidharma (470-543 CE) who reportedly moved from Northern India into China. For nine years he sat in meditation and was eventually approached by a young man named Hui-K'o who wanted to be Bodhidharma's disciple. Bodhidharma resisted, until, in an act of desperation, Hui-K'o cut off his left arm and said to Bodhidharma, "My mind is not at peace; please bring it peace." In reply Bodhidharma said, "If you bring me your mind I will give it peace." Hui-K'o replied, "When I look for it, I cannot find it." Bodhidharma answered, "There! I have pacified it for you." Hui-K'o then became enlightened.

Some centuries later Zen made its way into Japan, and one of its main schools developed what is known as the *koan system*. Koans are absurd riddles, such as the famous "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" which defies any logical response. The koan system involves a Zen master having his student answer a series of up to 50 absurd riddles over the course of many years. Around the eleventh-century famous koans were assembled in written collections. Some classic beginners' koans found in these collections are "What was your face like before you were born?" and "Does a dog have the Buddha-nature?" By struggling with these conceptually paradoxical questions, the student's mind would be loosened from traditional reasoning, he would see that ultimate reality is not discoverable, and experience the emptiness of all things. Some classical "correct" responses include lifting one finger, kicking a ball, and slapping the face of an inquirer. There are also intermediary level koans which request impossible tasks, such as "Stop that ship on the distant ocean," or "Take the four divisions of Tokyo out of your sleeve." A solution in this latter one might be to take out a paper handkerchief folded in four sections, which symbolically become the four divisions of Tokyo. In a series of formal consultations, the student would meet with his master twice daily to discuss progress on the

solution to his assigned koan. Usually the master would criticize the student's solution, and, ultimately, the student will recognize by himself when he gets it right. The end result is enlightenment for the student.

## D. CONFUCIAN PHILOSOPHY

Around 500 BCE, China was in social upheaval and went through what is called its *Warring States* period. National emperors lost control over China's various territories while local rulers increased their strength, waging wars against each other to the point that only the strongest states could survive. Although exaggerated, stories reported that as many as 400,000 people were slaughtered in battles. In response to the problem of this social chaos that impacted nearly everyone's life, a *Period of 100 Philosophers* emerged in which sages proposed various solutions. Some recommended a totalitarian system, concentrating power in the ruler. Others recommended loving everyone as a means of attaining peace. It was in this context that China's great teacher Confucius emerged, offering his own solution to the problem of social chaos.

Confucius (551–479 BCE) was born in what is now China's Shandong province, along the country's mid-coastal region. His family name was Kung, and the name "Confucius," by which we know him in the West, is a Latinized version of "Kung Fu-tzu", which means master Kung. His father, a distinguished soldier, and his mother both died when he was a child. He married at 19, had a son and daughter, and worked as a clerk in a temple in which he learned rituals from elders. Confucius set his eye on governmental work and eventually, in his 50s, held posts including police commissioner and imperial ambassador for a peace conference. Disillusioned by these jobs, he traveled for 13 years to the various states in China, giving advice on government. He made the grandiose claim to show concrete social improvements within one year, and achieve complete change within three years. No ruler took him up on his offer and, disillusioned again, he returned to his home state. He continued teaching his followers and died at age 73. Although he considered himself a failure, his followers preserved and developed his teachings, which ultimately resulted in the flourishing of the Confucian school that heavily impacted Chinese intellectual life for 2,000 years.

Confucius's solution to the problem of anarchy was to return to the old Chinese customs before social turmoil broke out. To aid in that effort he researched China's old cultural traditions and edited several books of ancient Chinese history and literature. Confucius wrote nothing of his own views, though, and the principal record of his teachings is a work called the *Analects*, or "digested conversations," which is an unsystematic collection of discussions, recorded by his students after his death. While the *Analects* is somewhat sketchy and does not record any of Confucius's organized discourses, it does offer a picture of his central teachings. As a philosopher, Confucius was foremost an ethicist who emphasized the importance of virtuous conduct. Much of his ethical thought focuses on four specific themes: ritual conduct, humaneness, the superior person, child obedience, and good government.

### Ritual Conduct

Foremost among Confucius's teachings is the notion of *ritual conduct* (*li*), which is the effortless adherence to social norms and the performance of customs. By Confucius's time, ritual conduct became associated with ceremonial formality, particularly in religious practices. But Confucius uses the notion more broadly to include customs as diverse as major holiday celebrations and simple greetings.

For Confucius, rituals and traditions are the visible glue that binds society together. For virtually every activity, there is a proper way of behaving. If we don't follow these customs, then, despite our best intentions, we behave like bumbling fools. He makes this point here:

Respectfulness without the rules of ritual conduct becomes laborious bustle. Carefulness without the rules of ritual conduct becomes timidity. Boldness without the rules of ritual conduct becomes insubordination. Straightforwardness without the rules of ritual conduct becomes rudeness. When those who are in high stations properly perform all their duties to their relations, the people are inspired towards virtue. When old friends are not neglected by them, the people are preserved from meanness. [*Analects*, 8.2]

Here's an example of how ritual conduct might apply to political life. Imagine that, during a city council meeting, I want to propose the development of a new park. As I make my case, I need to be respectful and careful, yet bold and straightforward. If I don't know the rules of ritual conduct, my efforts will be strained, and in the course of the discussion I might understate my view or unintentionally insult the council members. On the other hand, if I am properly skilled in the ritual conduct of business discussions, then I'll be able to make my case easily and effectively.

There is both an inward and outward component of ritual conduct. The outward component concerns simply the visible ritual itself. The inward component, however, involves having the proper attitude when engaged in ritual conduct, rather than simply going through the motions with no thought of their significance. Confucius argues that the true development of ritual conduct requires that we subdue ourselves. Also, when performing our various duties, it is important that our actions flow from within ourselves, and are not motivated by outward pressures:

Yen Yuan asked about perfect virtue. The Master said, "To subdue one's self and return to ritual conduct is perfect virtue. If a person can for one day subdue himself and return to ritual conduct, all under heaven will attribute perfect virtue to him. Is the practice of perfect virtue from a person himself, or is it from others?" Yen Yuan said, "I beg to ask the steps of that process." The Master replied, "Do not look at what is contrary to ritual conduct; do not listen to what is contrary to ritual conduct; do not speak what is contrary to ritual conduct; do not make movements which are contrary to ritual conduct." Yen Yuan then said, "Though I am deficient in intelligence and vigor, I will make it my business to practice this lesson." [ibid, 12.1]

For Confucius, learning ritual conduct involves active social participation, similar to how we learn any skill or art form through direct involvement. Insofar as it is a skill, Confucius says that the development of ritual conduct is similar to learning skills such as writing poetry or music. What all these skills have in common is that they involve cultivating a special aesthetic sense of appreciation. They also refine us, elevate the quality of our lives, and serve as a tool for moral instruction.

### **Humaneness and the Superior Person**

The Confucian notion of *humaneness* (*jen*, *wren*), is the attitude of goodness, benevolence, and altruism towards others. Again, there is a distinction between one's mere outer expressions of

humaneness and one's inner sense of it: "Fine words and an insinuating appearance are seldom associated with true humaneness" (ibid, 1.3). When we think of humane behavior, we think of the various ways that we relate to other people, has Confucius states here:

The Master said, "It is humane manners that constitute the excellence of a neighborhood. If a person in selecting a residence does not fix on one where such prevail, how can he be wise?" The Master said, "Those who are without humaneness cannot abide long either in a condition of poverty and hardship, or in a condition of enjoyment. The virtuous rest in humaneness; the wise desire humaneness." The Master said, "It is only the truly humane person who can love, or who can hate, others." The Master said, "If one's will is set on humaneness, there will be no practice of wickedness." [Ibid, 4.1-4]

To acquire humaneness, I should develop the virtues of dignity and patience, which will help me be at peace regardless of the difficulties that I face in life.

Central to the concept of humaneness is the Confucian *principle of reciprocity (shu)*, which is "Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you." This principle is similar to the famous Golden Rule, namely, "Do to others what you would want done to yourself." The principle difference, though, is that the Golden Rule puts forward a positive duty, that is, I should treat you benevolently or charitably since that is how I prefer to be treated. The principle of reciprocity, on the other hand, involves negative duties to avoid harm. For example, I should not steal from you or lie to you since I would not want that kind of treatment myself. Because of this difference in emphasis, the principle of reciprocity is sometimes called the "Silver Rule." We find Confucius present the principle of reciprocity in several passages throughout the *Analects*. In one case he chastises a student for not following the principle: "Tzu-kung said, 'What I do not wish people to do to me, I also wish not to do to people.' The Master said, 'you have not attained to that'" (ibid, 5.11). In another passage Confucius states that the principle of reciprocity should be the guiding principle of one's life: "Tzu-kung asked, saying, 'Is there one word that may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?' The Master said, 'Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others'" (ibid, 15.23). In another passage, the principle appears among a longer list of moral recommendations:

Chung-kung asked about perfect virtue. The Master said, "It is, when you go abroad, to behave to everyone as if you were receiving a great guest; to employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice; not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself; to have no murmuring against you in the country, and none in the family." Chung-kung said, "Though I am deficient in intelligence and vigor, I will make it my business to practice this lesson." [Ibid, 12.1-2]

Because of its emphasis on mere avoidance, the principle of reciprocity is sometimes criticized for being too passive: it is one thing to say that I should simply avoid harming you, but it is another and much better thing to say that I should actively seek your improvement. However, the wording of the principle of reciprocity is flexible enough to include positive as well as negative duties. For example, since I would not want anyone to withhold charity from me, then I should not withhold charity from others.

For Confucius, the *superior person (chun-tzu, junzi)* is the ideal human who personifies the virtue of humaneness. The term originally referred to children of aristocrats who inherited

their family estates, but, like the term “gentleman” in English, the notion of a *superior person* acquired a broader ethical meaning. In the *Analects*, Confucius sees the superior person as the ideal to which his followers should strive. The superior person consistently exhibits a range of virtuous qualities, including humility, respectfulness, kindness, justice, impartiality, honesty, consistency, caution, and studiousness. Although this is a somewhat abstract list of qualities, a set of passages in the *Analects* points out some very particular attitudes of the superior person:

The Master said, “The superior person is distressed by his lack of ability. He is not distressed by people not knowing him.” The Master said, “The superior person dislikes the thought of his name not being mentioned after his death.” The Master said, “What the superior person seeks is in himself. What the inferior person seeks is in others.” The Master said, “The superior person is dignified, but does not wrangle. He is sociable, but not a partisan.” The Master said, “The superior person does not promote someone simply on account of his words, nor does he put aside good words because of the person.” [Ibid, 15.18-22]

In the above we see that, paradoxically, the superior person is not driven by a need for fame, yet at the same time he “dislikes the thought of his name not being mentioned after his death.” What Confucius had in mind is something like this. The drive for fame while we are alive is too frequently tied with how wealthy, powerful, or successful we are. The underlying passions here are pride and arrogance, which the superior person should clearly reject. On the other hand, when we consider our life-long legacy and how people remember us after our deaths, we think more about how good we’ve been as human beings, and less about the degree of wealth and power that we’ve obtained. It is, then, admirable to hope to be remembered for our legacy as a good person.

In spite of the lengthy list of values that the superior person holds, Confucius stresses that the superior person is not a by-the-book rule follower, whose beliefs are rigidly fixed. On the contrary, “The superior person in the world does not set his mind either for anything, or against anything. What is right he will follow” (ibid, 4.10). That is, the superior person’s attitudes and conduct will be guided by an overall sense of justice, and not by a nitpicky set of regulations. In keeping with his emphasis on the internal aspects of moral attributes, Confucius describes the psychological state of tranquility to which the superior person must rise. Distress, anxiety, and fear are all obstructions: “The superior person is satisfied and composed; the inferior person is always full of distress” (ibid, 7.36). Regardless of how much tragedy we might experience, our internal sense of virtue should give us peace: “When internal examination discovers nothing wrong, what is there to be anxious about? What is there to fear?” (ibid, 12.4). That is, if I know that my internal character contains the marks of virtue, then I can take faith in this, even if I’m plagued with misfortunes such as family tragedy or financial disaster.

Becoming a superior person involves an ongoing process that cannot be quickly attained, and an anecdote about a seventeenth-century Confucian monk illustrates this point. Upon turning 90, the monk commented that he now saw how foolish he was at 80, and he looked forward to when he’d have better knowledge at a later age. Similarly, Confucius did not believe that he himself was a perfectly superior person: “In matters of learning I am perhaps equal to other people, but I have not yet attained to the character of the superior person, who carries out in his conduct what he professes” (Ibid, 7.33). That is, Confucius did not yet fully embody the values he knew that he should possess.

## Child Obedience and Good Government

Confucius held that there are *five relationships* (*wulun*) that underlie the order of society, namely, (1) father and son, (2) elder brother and younger brother, (3) husband and wife, (4) elder friend and junior friend, and (5) ruler and subject. Confucian writings sometimes refer to a shorter list of relationships called the “Three Bonds”, which include those of the father-son, husband-wife, and ruler-subject. Each of these involves a superior and a subordinate, and special duties are required of both parties:

What are “the things which people consider right?” Kindness on the part of the father, and child obedience on that of the son. Gentleness on the part of the elder brother, and obedience on that of the younger. Righteousness on the part of the husband, and submission on that of the wife. Kindness on the part of elders, and reverence on that of the juniors. Benevolence on the part of the ruler, and loyalty on that of the minister. These ten are the things which people consider to be right. [*Book of Rites*]

With each of these five relationships, the subordinate person is duty bound to show obedience, and the superior person to show kindness. Of the five relationships, the two that Confucius discusses the most are the father-son and the ruler-subject, which we’ll consider here in more detail

The relationship between father and son, commonly known as *child obedience* (*hsiao, xiao*), sets a standard for the others. Respect for *all* superiors is ultimately an extension of respect for one’s parents, and we should treat all elders with respect almost as if they were surrogate parents” (*Analects*, 1.6). By respecting parents we will respect elders in general, and by doing this we will be less likely to stir up confusion and thereby undermine social order, either in or outside of the home. Virtually all cultures stress the obligations that children have to respect and obey their parents and, to that extent, this value is not a Confucian invention. Like other virtues, though, Confucius gives a unique twist to this one by emphasizing the importance of having the proper attitude in fulfilling this duty, rather than simply abiding by the letter of the law. Without this proper inner attitude, we are no better than animals that might help provide for older members of its species: “Child obedience nowadays means to support one’s parents. But dogs and horses also are able to do something in the way of support. Without reverence, what is there to distinguish the one support given from the other?” (*Analects*, 2.7). By having the proper attitude of respect for our parents, we will perpetuate the value system that we learned at home, long after we are grown and leave the house: “If the son for three years does not alter from the way of his father, he may be called an obedient child” (*ibid*, 4.10). The respect that we have for our parents while they are alive continues in the form of ancestral veneration when they die, and requires that we perform various sacrificial duties.

Suppose that my father asks me to do something that was obviously wrong, such as steal the neighbor’s wheelbarrow or rob a store. Would child obedience obligate me to follow my father’s instructions? Confucius’s reply to this question was “When a command is wrong, a son should resist his father, and a civil servant should resist his noble ruler.” Respect for parents, then, is not blind obedience. One benefit of resisting is that we will remind our father of his moral duty and prevent him from committing some wrong: “If a man has a good friend to resist him in doing bad actions, he will have his reputation preserved. So, if a father has a son to resist his wrong command, he will be saved from committing serious faults” (*Classic of Child*

*Obedience*). The prospect of resisting one's parents and attempting to morally instruct them places the child in an awkward situation. This highlights the obligation that parents are under to cultivate a proper sense of morality within themselves and thus avoid forcing this dilemma on their children.

Turning next to the ruler-subject relationship, Confucius saw himself as a political reformer, and he held that good governing consists of the ruler setting the moral example for the whole country. His goodness will trickle down through the various layers of social hierarchy, and the whole country will prosper when he is benevolent. According to Confucius, "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it" (*Analects*, 2.1).

What, though, must the ruler himself do to acquire virtue? Confucius lists five kinds of actions that will lead to good government:

"When the person in authority is beneficent without great expense; when he lays tasks on the people without their grieving; when he pursues what he desires without being selfish; when he maintains a dignified ease without being proud; when he is majestic without being cruel." (ibid, 20.2)

First on this list is beneficence, and, to display this, the ruler does not necessarily have to actively shower his subjects with luxuries. Instead, the ruler can emphasize things from which people naturally benefit, such as efficient governmental programs and honest governmental administrators. Second, concerning laying tasks on people without making them grieve, Confucius believes that the ruler should discover people's natural capacities and encourage them to work in those areas. A musician, for example, should not be forced to work as an accountant. Third, a ruler can unselfishly pursue what he desires when he restricts those desires to cultivating a good government. Fourth, without being arrogant, he should carry himself with dignity with everything and everyone he comes in contact with. Fifth, without being fierce, a ruler should appear majestic in everything that he does – right down to how he places a hat on his head.

Good government is the theme of a later Confucian classic titled *The Great Learning*, which tradition attributes to Confucius's grandson. According to this work, good government is a matter of rulers exhibiting their *clear character* to the world, that is, displaying their virtue as a model for others to follow. How does the ruler acquire clear character? *The Great Learning*, tells us that there are eight causal links that culminate in clear character and effective governing. The underlying theme of these eight steps is intense moral and philosophical reflection:

The ancients who wished to exhibit their clear character to the world first brought order to their states. Wishing to order their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their personal lives. Wishing to cultivate their personal lives, they first corrected their minds. Wishing to correct their minds, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge rests in investigating things.  
[*The Great Learning*]

The order of the eight steps, then, is this:

Investigate things > extend knowledge > sincerity in thoughts > correct one's mind > cultivate personal life > regulate families > order states > exhibit clear character

The first step in acquiring clear character is extending our knowledge by “investigating things.” For Confucius this involves not only knowledge of arts and sciences, but a knowledge of oneself and one's limitations: “When you know a thing, to hold that you know it; and when you do not know a thing, to allow that you do not know it; this is knowledge” (*Analects*, 2.17).

### **Mencius: Inherent Human Goodness**

The second most influential philosopher in the Confucian tradition is Mencius (390–305 BCE), or Mengzi. A few generations removed from Confucius, Mencius studied under a disciple of Confucius's grandson and, like Confucius, Mencius traveled around China to promote political reform. He confronted rival philosophical schools, typically those that emphasized human selfishness. Mencius believed that governments should be run through exemplary conduct, with goodness as the goal. The most well known aspect of Mencius's thought is his view of the inherent goodness of people. According to Mencius, our minds and hearts house our inherent tendency towards moral goodness. Evil, he believes, results from bad social influences that reduce our natural moral strength.

Mencius presents this idea in a conversation between himself and a skeptical philosopher named Kao. Kao argues that human nature is neither good nor bad, but can be molded either way, just as we can mold a piece of wood into different things. “Human nature,” says Kao, “is like a tree, and righteousness is like a wooden cup or a bowl. The fashioning of benevolence and righteousness out of a person's nature is like the making of cups and bowls from the tree” (*Mencius*, 6a.1). But Mencius rejects Kao's analogy and argues that any such “molding”, even for the sake of moral goodness, would do violence to our nature. We would thus be forced to see moral virtues such as benevolence and righteousness as distortions of who we are. Mencius asks,

Without touching the nature of the tree, can you make it into cups and bowls? You must do violence and injury to the tree before you can make cups and bowls with it. If you must do violence and injury to the tree in order to make cups and bowls with it, on your principles you must in the same way do violence and injury to humaneness in order to fashion from it benevolence and righteousness. Thus, your words would certainly lead all people on to consider benevolence and righteousness to be calamities. [Ibid]

As the conversation continues, Kao insists that human nature is neither inherently good nor inherently evil. But, just as we might redirect the flow of water east or west, society is capable of directing our nature towards good or towards evil. Thus, according to Kao, “Human nature is indifferent to good and evil, just as water is indifferent to the east and west” (ibid, 6a.2). But Mencius rejects this analogy too, and argues that human nature possesses potential goodness, just as the nature of water is to flow down hill:

Water indeed will flow indifferently to the east or west, but will it flow indifferently up or down? The tendency of human nature to do good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards. All people have this tendency to good, just as all water flows downwards. Now, by striking water and causing it to leap up, you may make it go over your forehead, and, by damming and leading it, you may force it up a hill. But are such movements

according to the nature of water? It is the force applied which causes them. When people are made to do what is not good, their nature is dealt with in this way. [Ibid]

Mencius tells us exactly what our inherently good nature consists of. First, he argues that we naturally have four specific moral virtues, namely, commiseration, shame, respect, and approval. Second, these four virtues naturally give rise to others, namely humaneness, righteousness, ritual conduct, knowledge. Mencius insists that nature has instilled these in all of us, which we can all find if we just look for them: “We are certainly furnished with them. Any different view simply owes to an absence of reflection” (ibid).

## E. DAOIST PHILOSOPHY

Like Confucianism, Daoism emerged during China’s Warring States period, and its specific recommendation for ending social chaos was that we should imitate nature and go back to the primitive tradition of China before the appearance of kings and feudal systems. Tradition credits the founding of Daoism to a figure named Lao-tzu (Laozi), literally meaning “master Lao.” But virtually nothing concrete is known about him, and some modern scholars argue he was created by early Daoists as a kind of rival to Confucius. Tradition also credits him with composing Daoism’s most important text, the *Dao de Jing* (*Tao te Ching*), which literally means *The Book of the Way and its Power*. According to one story, as Lao-tzu was leaving his home town, the city gatekeeper was sorry to see the great master go and asked that he write a book of his views by which people could remember him. Lao-tzu sat down on the spot and composed the *Dao de Jing*. Although tradition dates the *Dao de Jing* at around 450 BCE, scholars today place it at around 300 BCE based on its literary style. The work is an anthology of sayings compiled to instruct kings on government; specifically it recommends that kings should rule through an extreme “hands off” policy, allowing social events to conform to nature.

The second most important book in Daoism is the work attributed to and named after Daoist philosopher Chuang-tzu (Zhuangzi, 369-286 BCE), or, “master Chuang”. Unlike the *Dao de Jing*, the *Chuang-Tzu* is not a political treatise. Intended for a more general readership, it is composed in a popular style with vivid stories and parables. We know few facts about Chuang-tzu’s life, and tradition maintains that he held a minor political position. According to one story, he was once invited to become a prime minister but replied, “I would rather leave myself to my own enjoyment in the mire than be a slave to the ruler of a state. I will never take office. Thus, I shall remain free to follow my own inclinations” (*Chuang-Tzu*, 37). We also find an anecdote about his burial plans, which highlights the theme of naturalness in Daoism:

When Chuang-tzu was about to die, his disciples indicated their wish to give him a grand burial. He replied, “I will have heaven and earth for my coffin and its shell; the sun and moon for my two round symbols of jade; the stars and constellations for my pearls and jewels; and all things assisting as the mourners. Will not the provisions for my burial be complete? What could you add to them?” [Ibid, 32]

We will look at some of the more prominent themes that appear in both the *Dao de Jing* and the *Chuang-tzu*.

### The Dao

The notion of the *Dao* is the central concept in Daoism. Literally the term means “way” or “path”, but it more specifically refers to the fundamental ordering principle behind nature, society, and individual people. It is the ultimate reality of the cosmos, and one English version of the *Dao de Jing* even translates the word "*Dao*" as "God", though is probably not the best choice. An initial obstacle to understanding the concept of the *Dao* is that it has an unspeakable mystical quality and cannot be defined. We see this in the opening and most famous passage of the book:

The *Dao* that can be named is not the eternal and unchanging *Dao*. The name that can be spoken is not the eternal and unchanging name. The nameless is the source of heaven and earth. The named is the mother of all things. Always be without desires and you will see mystery. Always be with desire, and you will see only its effects. These two are really the same, although, as development takes place, they receive the different names. They are both a mystery, and where mystery is the deepest we find the gate of all that is subtle and wonderful. [*Dao de Jing*, 1]

According to the above, if you try to name, speak, or describe the *Dao*, then you have missed the point and distorted the *Dao*'s meaning. It is an indescribable source of all existence, and we grasp the *Dao* only by mystically experiencing its subtlety. This experience begins with subduing one's desires. From the start, the *Dao de Jing* advocates a non-intellectual and even *anti-intellectual* approach. We should abandon hopes of finding an adequate verbal description of the *Dao*, and instead psychologically realign ourselves so that we are not driven by our desires. With no mental conceptions or desires to muddy the waters, we then allow the *Dao* to exhibit itself through our own lives, and we can recognize its presence in the natural world around us.

Another passage early on in the *Dao de Jing* states that the indescribable nature of the *Dao* is like an empty container, which we should never try to fill with concrete descriptions that will invariably misrepresent it:

The *Dao* is like the emptiness of a container; and in our employment of it we must be on our guard against all fullness. How deep and unfathomable it is, as if it were the honored ancestor of all things. We should blunt our sharp points, and unravel the complications of things; we should dim our brightness, and bring ourselves into agreement with the obscurity of others. How pure and still the *Dao* is, as if it would continue forever. I do not know whose son it is. It might appear to have been before God. [Ibid, 4]

The *Dao*'s nature, according to the above, is infinitely deep and as mysterious as any investigation into the origin of things in the far distant past. To understand it, we must take an approach that is opposite to what we might expect. For example, we typically learn about things through our senses of sight, hearing, or touch. But the *Dao* lacks any sensory qualities that might enable us to perceive it in those ways. In fact, if we try to investigate the *Dao* as though it were just another physical object of perception, we will find that its nature actually consists of *lacking* any tangible qualities: “We look at it, and we do not see it, and we name it ‘the colorless.’ We listen to it, and we do not hear it, and we name it ‘the soundless.’ We try to grasp it, and do not get hold of it, and we name it ‘the bodiless’” (ibid, 14). What is the *Dao*'s form? It is formless. What is its appearance? It is invisible. Try as we might to list its qualities, we are left with empty descriptions.

In spite of the *Dao*'s unspeakable quality, the *Dao de Jing* tells us at least something about the *Dao*'s nature. One recurring point is that the *Dao* both creates and sustains everything that exists: "The *Dao* produces all things and nourishes them; it produces them and does not claim them as its own; it does all, and yet does not boast of it; it presides over all, and yet does not control them" (ibid, 10). Although the *Dao* is the originator of all things, it should not be misconstrued as a kind of pre-existing God who created a universe distinct from itself. Rather, before things originated, the *Dao* was in a formless state of potential. As it took on the state of existence, the *Dao* produced things that remain part of its nature:

There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. How still and formless it was, standing alone, and undergoing no change, reaching everywhere and in no danger of being exhausted. It may be regarded as the Mother of all things. I do not know its name, and I give it the designation of the *Dao*, the Way or Course. [Ibid, 25]

The *Dao de Jing* repeatedly refers to the *Dao* as the *mother* of everything, and the metaphor of a mother has important implications. A cosmic *father* evokes images of a craftsman or builder who aggressively manufactures the world from some external raw material. But a cosmic *mother* gives birth to things, generating them from within herself, and continually nurturing them. It is like a great tree that sprouts branches, leaves, and fruit, continually feeding them all from within. It is like a great river that spawns and sustains a myriad of life forms.

The takeaway message is that we should all strive to follow the *Dao*. Animals and plants do this naturally, and it is only humans that have the capacity to act contrary to it since our minds make us think that we are independent entities apart from nature. We create artificial environments in which to live and see nature as something to conquer for our personal benefit, rather than something that we should be part of. When we go against the *Dao*, the consequences are disastrous for us personally, and for everything that we damage in our path.

## **Return**

A central theme of Daoism is that of *return*: all things eventually decay and return to their ultimate source within the *Dao*. There are clear natural cycles in the cosmos: everything around us has been recycled and will again be recycled. We tend to praise human accomplishments that have the most lasting value, such as timeless works of art, scientific discoveries, and moral traditions. However, when we look at nature, we see that nothing is permanent and everything comes and goes in cycles. Growth and decay are not just one-time events, but occur again and again in an endless natural cycle. This is the pulse of the universe that we find in most everything that we observe. Trees, animals, and even societies grow and die, and their elements will ultimately be recycled. The passage below illustrates this point with plants, which first display luxuriant growth, and then return to their origin:

All things alike go through their processes of activity, and then we see them return to their original state. When things in the vegetable world have displayed their luxuriant growth, we see each of them return to its root. This returning to their root is what we call the state of stillness; and that stillness may be called a reporting that they have fulfilled their appointed end. [Ibid, 16]

Plants and animals die and decay, leaving their elements to become the raw materials of other things. We too will wither, die and decay, whether we like it or not. Chuang-tzu gives a story of a dying man whose body has become deformed. Rather than be angry and resistant to his physical changes, he gladly accepts them:

If the creator transformed my left arm into a rooster, I would watch the time of the night. If he transformed my right arm into a cross-bow, I would then be looking for a duck to shoot for roasting. If he transformed my rump-bone into a wheel and my spirit into a horse, I would then be able to ride in my own chariot. I'd never have to change horses. I obtained life because it was my time. I am now parting with it in accordance with the same law. [*Chuang-Tzu*, 6]

According to Chuang-tzu, then, we should submit to the natural process of transformation, and to do otherwise amounts to disobedience: "If a parent tells a son to go east, west, south, or north, the son simply follows the command. The yin and yang [forces of nature] are more to a man than his parents are. If they are hastening my death and I do not quietly submit to them, I would be obstinate and rebellious." Ultimately, we have no say in the matter.

### **Non-Action and Non-Mind**

The most practical advice of Daoism is that of *non-action* (*wu wei*), also called *effortless action*: everything we do should flow with simple spontaneity and without contrivance. Artificial actions run counter to the natural course of things, and usually involve aggression and competition. Picture a log floating down a river with a large rock in its path. Rather than knocking the rock over, the log gently bumps into it, casually floats around it, and continues on its course. Passivity, rather than aggression, is the attitude towards life that we should adopt. In the natural world, weakness is linked with life, and strength with death:

Man at his birth is supple and weak; at his death, firm and strong. So it is with all things. In their early growth, trees and plants are soft and brittle; at their death they are dry and withered. In this manner, firmness and strength are the accompaniments of death, whereas softness and weakness are the accompaniments of life. [*Dao de Jing*, 76]

Chuang-Tzu gives a story that vividly describes *non-action*. A prince was watching his cook slice meat with a rhythmical and harmonious cutting technique. The cook then explained his secret:

I am devoted to the method of the Dao, which is superior to any skill. . . . Observing the natural lines in the meat, my knife slips through the great crevices and slides through the great cavities, taking advantage of the accommodations thus presented. My skill avoids the ligaments, and even more so the large bones. A good cook changes his knife every year because he cleanly *cuts*. An ordinary cook changes his every month because he *hacks*. Now I have used my knife for nineteen years. [*Chuang-Tzu*, 3]

By working in harmony with the meat and slicing between the joints, rather than hacking through bone, the cook incorporated the practice of non-action. He lost awareness of the techniques of

butchering and cut the meat almost as if he was in a trance. Impressed by the cook's explanation, the Prince concluded, "I have heard the words of my cook, and learned how to care for life."

We might think that passivity and weakness would make us easy targets of attack, and more vulnerable to manipulation than we otherwise might be. Paradoxically, though, the *Dao de Jing* explains that non-action is actually the most successful means of self-defense and military engagement: "The softest thing in the world dashes against and overcomes the hardest; that which has no substantial existence enters where there is no crevice" (*Dao de Jing*, 43). We overcome obstacles by homing in on an adversary's vulnerabilities and then effortlessly shattering their strength. A good illustration of this is the Martial Arts, which distinguish between hard and soft techniques. Hard defense forms such as Tae Kwon Do attempt to batter an adversary into submission through forceful kicks and punches. By contrast, soft defense forms such as Aikido attempt to redirect an adversary's force against himself through techniques of twisting and throwing. Daoists prefer a soft approach when engaging in combat: "The person who relies on the strength of his forces does not conquer, just as a tree that has grown strong is doomed by the lumberjack" (*ibid*, 76). The effectiveness of this soft approach is evident in the devastating effects that water sometimes has: "There is nothing in the world more soft and weak than water, and yet for attacking things that are firm and strong there is nothing that can outrank it" (*ibid*, 14).

Paralleling the notion of non-action is that of *non-mind* (*wu-hsin*): we need to eliminate knowledge and act spontaneously through natural intuition. Accumulated knowledge hinders creativity and can make one inflexible or subject to a false sense of security. Since the *Dao* runs through each of us, everything that we need to know about life is already within ourselves. Nature will automatically direct us when needs arise. The *Dao de Jing* rejects traditional methods of education, such as learning from a master or traveling around and gaining knowledge through experience. The true sage never has to even leave home:

Without going outside his door, one understands all that takes place under the sky; without looking out from his window, one sees the *Dao* of Heaven. The further that one goes out from himself, the less he knows. Therefore the sages got their knowledge without traveling, gave their right names to things without seeing them, and accomplished their ends without any purpose of doing so. [*Ibid*, 47]

Not only should we avoid acquiring knowledge by conventional means, but we should also rid ourselves of the cumbersome knowledge that we've acquired throughout the years. Most importantly, our understanding of the *Dao* itself comes through the practice of non-mind: "Those who are skilled in the *Dao* do not dispute about it, and those who dispute are not skilled in it" (*ibid*, 81). Philosophical discourse and debate will be of no help, and the most perceptive Daoists avoid debating about the *Dao*.

## **Minimal Governing**

As a political treatise, the *Dao de Jing* insists that if rulers follow the *Dao* then their states will be well ordered and in natural harmony: "If a prince or the king could hold onto the *Dao*, all would spontaneously submit themselves to him" (*Ibid*, 32). To rule in accord with the *Dao*, leaders must abandon common notions of governance, which typically involve authoritatively imposing their wills on the people. Instead, a more *Dao*-centered way of ruling involves not ruling at all, but allowing society to function naturally.

Successful rulers should adopt the attitude of non-action when governing: the more aggressive input and regulation a government imposes on its citizens, the more that disorder results. But when a leader sits back and does nothing, society develops on its own. Nature needs no help from rulers, and when the general public follows the *Dao*, each person will naturally find peaceful and simple ways to flourish. Even a well-intentioned leader may disrupt the natural flow of social order by imposing rules. The mere existence of rules will generate rule-breakers. Daoism thus recommends political *anarchy* in the true sense of the word, namely, a peaceful state of *no rule* in which we naturally find our place:

A sage has said, "I will do nothing with purpose, and the people will transform themselves; I will keep still, and the people will correct themselves. I will not trouble with them, and the people will become rich by themselves; I will show no ambition, and the people will arrive at primitive simplicity by themselves." [Ibid, 57]

The best style of governing, then, is for the ruler to take a hands-off approach through the practice of non-action. However, to the extent that rulers do intervene in society, they should try to rid artificial values from their subjects' minds through the practice of non-mind:

In exercising his government, the sage empties the people's minds, fills their bellies, weakens their wills, and strengthens their bones. He constantly tries to keep them without knowledge and without desire, and where there are those who have knowledge, to keep them from acting on it. When there is this abstinence from action, good order is universal. [Ibid, 3]

As noted earlier, while things in the natural world automatically follow the law of the *Dao*, people do so by choice, and this may require rulers to help empty people's minds of ideas that distract from the *Dao*. The specific kind of knowledge that is most damaging to social harmony involves conventional standards of value and worth. Nature does not teach us to value one style of clothes over another, for example. The value that we place on specific luxury items, leisure activities, concepts of beauty, or human accomplishments, are principally matters of cultural brainwashing. Criminals break the law because they cannot easily acquire the endless array of things society dangles before them. If rulers can get their citizens to practice non-mind and shed their preconceived standards of value, then they won't be seduced into criminal behavior.

The perfect society envisioned by Daoism does not consist of large and complex cities of the sort that exist throughout the world today. Instead, primitive simplicity is the ideal, which in practical terms means small farming families and communities. Chuang-tzu describes this original and more natural human living environment:

People originally wove and made themselves clothes; they tilled the ground and for food. These are common to humaneness. They all agreed on this, and did not form themselves into separate classes. In this way they were constituted and left to their natural tendencies. Therefore in the age of perfect virtue people walked along quietly, steadily looking forward. At that time, on the hills there were no footpaths or excavated passages. On the lakes there were no boats or dams. [*Chuang-Tzu*, 9]

This, according to Chuang-tzu, is how society originally was; but then rulers came along and disrupted its natural simplicity by imposing rules and artificial standards:

When sages appeared, tripping people up with charity and constraining people with the duty to one's neighbor, then people universally began to be perplexed. The sages went to excess in performing music and fussed over the practice of ceremonies. Then people began to be separated from each other. . . . The injury done to the Dao in order to practice charity and duty to one's neighbor was the error of the sages. [Ibid]

Leaders first disrupted the natural order of things by introducing an alien standard of morality: "they dangled charity and duty to one's neighbor in order to comfort their minds" (ibid). Leaders added to this an endless list of complex ceremonies, which only confused people and created differences between them. These differences prompted people to outdo each other by striving for knowledge and pursuing personal gain. Finally, leaders created governments to assure that people conformed to these new standards. The best rulers, then, are those that facilitate a primitive society, and the worst rulers are those that try to force order on people through the creation of rules.

### **Lieh-Tzu: Following Natural Desires**

After the *Dao de Jing* and the *Chuang-Tzu*, the third most important book in Daoism is the *Lieh-Tzu*, meaning "master Lieh". Tradition attributes it to a scholar named Lieh Yukou from period of 100 philosophers, but scholars today date its composition at around 300 CE. Sometimes called the *Classic of Complete Emptiness*, the *Lieh-Tzu* recommends pursuing the path of emptiness as a means of becoming united with the *Dao*. As a whole, the work has a skeptical and dismal undertone, emphasizing the certainty of our annihilation, resigning oneself to fate, and abandoning efforts in life. In view of the shortness of life, the work recommends that we follow our own natural inclinations in pursuit of happiness.

In the most famous part of the book (Section 7, titled Yang-Tzu), Lieh-tzu criticizes the emphasis we often place on pleasing others and acquiring notoriety that will last beyond the grave. This emphasis is especially strong in Confucianism, which we've seen holds that "The superior person dislikes the thought of his name not being mentioned after his death" (*Analects*, 15.20). Lieh-tzu begins his argument by noting how short life is. If we're lucky we will live for at most 100 years, but most of our lives will be consumed by infancy, the incapacities of old age, sleeping, suffering and illness. After all of this "there is less than an hour during which time we are comfortable, satisfied and carefree." Where, then, are we to find happiness during our brief lives? Lieh-tzu's answer is *pleasure*: "It is only found in beautiful things and good food, music and sex" (*Lieh-tzu*, 7). Unfortunately, he continues, our efforts here are often thwarted. Sometimes these pleasures are out of our reach. Worse yet, we often voluntarily forego available pleasures in the hopes of attaining fame or empty praise after our deaths. And even when alone we deny ourselves pleasures simply to conform to what others expect. "We thus deny ourselves happiness in our best years, and we cannot live freely for a moment" (ibid).

Lieh-tzu's solution is that we should enjoy life's pleasures when the opportunities arise, and avoid conforming for the sake of praise from others. It is irrelevant whether you leave an honorable or dishonorable legacy after your death since, once dead, you won't be conscious of your legacy at all:

People of long ago understood that in life we are here temporarily and in death we are gone temporarily. ... The wicked and foolish both die. While alive they were the virtuous emperors Yao and Shun. When dead they are rotten bones. While alive they were the evil emperors Chieh and Chou. When dead they are rotten bones. In either case, they are rotten bones. Can anyone tell them apart? Enjoy your life right now while you still have it. Why bother with what happens to you after you die? [Ibid]

On face value, Lieh-tzu's emphasis on pursuing pleasure seems to run counter to the Daoist rejection of desire, which we find in the opening verse of the *Dao de Jing*: "Always be without desires and you will see mystery; always be with desire, and you will see only its effects." But there may be some wiggle room here. On the one hand, if we are preoccupied with desire then we will not be able to see the *Dao* work through all things, including our own lives. On the other hand, though, part of our nature is to have desires: our natural inclinations should guide our conduct. The issue then rests on whether the desires for pleasure are natural or artificially imposed. Lieh-tzu's list appears to be firmly grounded in our natural human inclinations, which includes desires for beautiful things, good food, music and sex.

## F. CONCLUSION

This chapter opened stating that Eastern philosophies tend to be pantheistic—the view that God is the totality of the cosmos. While the general notion of pantheism may be easy enough to grasp, the devil is in the details, and the various Eastern philosophies wrestled with this concept in different ways. Classical Hindu writings, like the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita*, focused on the pantheistic idea of God at the core of our true identities, and how we might discover the Self-God through Yoga practices like meditation. Vedanta philosophers pushed the idea of monism (the cosmos being composed of one divine stuff) but disagreed about whether God was undifferentiated or had parts. Within Buddhism, the theme of pantheism emerges first with the notion of nirvana, the idea that we should extinguish all desire and components of our ordinary consciousness. Within the nirvana state, we subdue our individual selves and experience the oneness of everything. Mahayana notions of emptiness stress that even the nirvana experience is undifferentiated and empty of descriptive content. While classical Confucian philosophy focused more on moral virtue than on the nature of God, its moral message has a strong theme of social interconnectedness. Some later Confucian philosophers developed this idea of interconnectedness in pantheistic ways. Daoism's pantheism appears clearly in its view that the *Dao* is the natural force of the universe, which underlies everything. While Hinduism and Buddhism have us gain enlightenment by disassociating ourselves from the world of appearances, Daoism takes the opposite approach and has us discover the interconnectedness of ultimate reality within the cycles in the natural world.

Eastern religions invariably maintain that understanding ultimate reality and reaching enlightenment are difficult tasks: it is hard for us to find the Self-God within us, or reach Nirvana, or become a Superior Person, or live in accord with the *Dao*. If Easterners themselves must struggle to internalize these concepts, what chance do people in Western cultures have who lack the benefit of life-long exposure to pantheistic ideas? Even if we can intellectually grasp the central points of these Eastern philosophies, we may not be able to take them seriously or adapt them into our already formed views of things. But while there is a gap between pantheistic and non-pantheistic views of divine reality, some middle ground may still be found. It will

invariably, though, require at least some compromise of the Western view that God is a distinct being from his creation.

Those who doubt the existence of a divine being face yet a different obstacle when approaching Eastern philosophy: is all this Eastern talk about undifferentiated ultimate reality and mystical enlightenment just nonsense? But even here there may be some room for compromise, since the pantheistic message of Eastern philosophy is capable of a naturalistic spin. The natural world is interconnected, both with its general laws and forces of nature that govern physical bodies throughout the universe, and with the ecological interdependence of living things on earth. Daoism in particular has been adapted to a non-religious view of the natural world: the Dao is just the flow of all the interconnected components of nature. On this view, we humans can become enlightened about our part in this unified fabric through what is called *nature mysticism*: we might experience a unity of all things when reflecting on some dramatic component of the natural world. For some mystics, reflecting on something like a sunset, a forest or an ocean can trigger a sense of connection with the natural world.

### **READING 1: HINDUISM AND RELEASE THROUGH SELFLESS ACTION** (*Bhagavad Gita*, Sect. 2)

*Introduction: The Bhagavad Gita explores several paths to achieving release (moksha), and in the selection below Krishna discusses path of selfless action (karma yoga), which involves routinely acting with indifference to the fruits of our actions. By engaging in pure action, unconcerned with their results, we distance ourselves from the outer layers of our identities and our perceptions of the world. We thus become more sensitive to the reality of the Atman-Brahman with us.*

[Krishna:] Your business is with actions only, and never with the fruits of your actions. So do not let the fruit of your actions motivate you, and do not be attached to inaction. Perform action, Arjuna, dwelling in the union of the divine. Renounce attachments, and balance yourself evenly between success and failure. Equilibrium is called Yoga. Action is inferior to discrimination; so, take refuge in the intellect. People are pitiable who work only for its fruits. By disciplining one's intellect, one abandons both good and evil deeds. Therefore, you should cling to Yoga [of selfless action], which is skill in action. The wise disciplined their intellect, renounced the fruits of their actions, released (*moksha*) themselves from the bonds of birth, and attained a state of bliss. When your intellect escapes from the tangle of delusion, then you too will be indifferent about what you had heard and will hear [in the Vedas].

[Arjuna:] What is the mark of the person who is stable of mind and steadfast in contemplation, Krishna? How does the stable-minded person talk, sit or walk?

[Krishna:] When a person abandons all the desires of his heart and is satisfied in the Self and by the Self, then he is called "stable in mind." A sage of stable mind is free from anxiety when surrounded by pains, is indifferent when surrounded by pleasures, and is freed from passion, fear and anger. He is without attachments on every side, whether desirable or undesirable, and neither likes nor dislikes. The person of understanding is well poised. Just as a tortoise pulls in all its limbs, the sage withdraws his senses from the objects, and his understanding is well poised.

### **READING 2: ZEN BUDDHISM AND ZEN KOANS** (*The Gateless Gate*)

*Introduction: Mahayana Buddhism holds that ultimate reality is empty of any descriptive content, and the Zen branch of Mahayana Buddhism attempts to reveal this through absurd riddles, or Koans. Below are examples of three such Koans. They are presented in dialogues between Zen students and their masters; following that is a brief comment on the dialogue by thirteenth-century Zen master Mumon.*

### **18. Tozan's Three Pounds**

The story: A monk asked Master Tozan when he was weighing some flax: "What is Buddha?" Master Tozan replied: "This flax weighs three pounds."

Master Mumon's comment: Old Tozan's Zen is like a clam. The minute the shell opens you see the whole inside. However, I want to ask you: Do you see the real Tozan?

Three pounds of flax in front of your nose, close enough, and mind is still closer. Whoever talks about affirmation and negation lives in the right and wrong region.

### **19. Everyday Life Is the Path**

The Story: Joshu asked Master Nansen: "What is the path?" Master Nansen said: "Everyday life is the path." Joshu asked: "Can it be studied?" Master Nansen said: "If you try to study, you will be far away from it." Joshu asked: "If I do not study, how can I know it is the path?" Master Nansen said: "The path does not belong to the perception world, neither does it belong to the nonperception world. Cognition is a delusion and noncognition is senseless. If you want to reach the true path beyond doubt, place yourself in the same freedom as sky. You name it neither good nor not-good." At these words Joshu was enlightened.

Master Mumon's comment: Master Nansen could melt Joshu's frozen doubts at once when Joshu asked his questions. I doubt though if Joshu reached the point that Master Nansen did. He needed thirty more years of study.

### **24. Without Words, Without Silence**

The Story: A monk asked Master Fuketsu: "Without speaking, without silence, how can you express the truth?" Master Fuketsu observed: "I always remember springtime in southern China. The birds sing among innumerable kinds of fragrant flowers."

Master Mumon's comment: Master Fuketsu used to have lightning Zen. Whenever he had the opportunity, he flashed it. But this time he failed to do so and only borrowed from an old Chinese poem. Never mind Master Fuketsu's Zen. If you want to express the truth, throw out your words, throw out your silence, and tell me about your own Zen.

Without revealing his own penetration, he offered another's words, not his to give. Had he chattered on and on, even his listeners would have been embarrassed.

### **READING 3: CONFUCIANISM AND HUMAN NATURE AS EVIL** (*Hsun-Tzu*, ch. 17 "Human Nature is Evil")

*Introduction: The Confucian philosopher Hsun-tzu (298–238 BCE), a younger contemporary of Mencius, entered the debate about the goodness or badness of human nature. While Mencius argued that human nature is good, Hsun-tzu argued*

*that it is fundamentally evil, and it is only through education and ritual conduct that we can correct it.*

Human nature is evil and the good that we show is artificial. Even at birth human nature includes the love of gain. Since we act according to our desires, conflict and robberies emerge. We will not find self-denial and altruism. Human nature includes envy and dislike, and as actions are in accordance with these, violence and injuries spring up, whereas loyalty and faith do not. Human nature includes the desires of the ears and the eyes, leading to the love of sounds and beauty. And as the actions are in accordance with these, lewdness and disorder spring up, whereas righteousness and ritual conduct, with their various orderly displays, do not. It thus appears that following human nature and yielding to its feelings will surely create strife and theft. It will lead to violation of everyone's duties and disruption of all order, until we are in a state of savagery. We must have the influence of teachers and laws, and the guidance of ritual conduct and righteousness. For, from these we get self-denial, altruism, and an observance of the well-ordered regulations of conduct, which results in a state of good government. From all this it is plain that human nature is evil; the good which it shows is artificial.

Consider some illustrations. A crooked stick must be submitted to the pressing-frame to soften and bond it, and then it becomes straight. A blunt knife must be submitted to the grindstone and whetstone, and then it becomes sharp. Similarly, human nature, being evil, must be submitted to teachers and laws, and then it becomes correct. It must be submitted to ritual conduct and righteousness, and then it is capable of being governed. If people were without teachers and laws, our condition would be one of deviation and insecurity, and would be entirely wrong. If we were without ritual conduct and righteousness, our condition would be one of rebellious disorder and we would reject all government. The sage kings of old understood that human nature was evil, in a state of hazardous deviation, improper, rebellious, disorderly, and resistant to governance. Accordingly, they set up the principles of righteousness and ritual conduct, and framed laws and regulations. These efforts served to straighten and embellish our natural feelings. They correct them, tame them, change them and guide them. By this means we might proceed on a path of moral governance which is in agreement with reason. Now, the superior person is the one who is transformed by teachers and laws. He takes on the distinction of learning, and follows the path of ritual conduct and righteousness. The inferior person is the one who follows his nature and its feelings, indulges its resentments, and walks contrary to ritual conduct and righteousness. Looking at the subject in this way, we see clearly that human nature is evil, and the good that it shows is artificial.

One might ask, "If human nature is evil, what is the source of ritual conduct and righteousness?" I reply, all ritual conduct and righteousness are the artificial productions of the sages, and should not be thought of as growing out of human nature. It is just as when a potter makes a vessel from the clay. The vessel is the product of the workman's art, and should not be thought of as growing out of human nature. Or it is as when another workman cuts and hews a vessel out of wood; it is the product of his art, and is not to be considered as growing out of human nature. The sages pondered long in thought and gave themselves to practice, and so they succeeded in producing ritual conduct and righteousness, and setting up laws and regulations. In this way ritual conduct and righteousness, laws and regulations, are artificial products of the sages, and should not be seen as growing properly from human nature.

#### **READING 4: DAOISM AND TRANSFORMATION** (*Chuang-Tzu*, Book 6)

*Introduction: The following selection by Daoist philosopher Chuang-Tzu describes how four friends learn the lesson of the transformation of all things as they face death.*

Masters Ssu, Yu, Li, and Lai were all four conversing together. They asked, "Who can make non-action his head, life his backbone, and death the tail of his existence? Who knows how birth and death, existence and annihilation comprise one single body? The person who understands this will be admitted to friendship with us." The four men looked at one another and laughed, but no one grasped with his mind the drift of the questions. All, however, were friends together.

Not long after, Yu fell ill, and Ssu went to see him. "How great is the Creator!" said the sufferer. "He made me the deformed object that I am!" Yu was a crooked hunchback; his five viscera were squeezed into the upper part of his body; his chin bent over his navel; his shoulder was higher than his crown; on his crown was an ulcer pointing to the sky; his breath came and went in gasps. Nevertheless, he was easy in his mind, and made no trouble of his condition. He limped to a well, looked at himself in it, and said, "I can't believe that the Creator would have made me the deformed object that I am!" Ssu said, "Do you dislike your condition?" He replied, "No, why should I dislike it? If the creator transformed my left arm into a rooster, I would watch the time of the night. If he transformed my right arm into a cross-bow, I would then be looking for a duck to shoot for roasting. If he transformed my rump-bone into a wheel and my spirit into a horse, I would then be able to ride in my own chariot. I'd never have to change horses. I obtained life because it was my time. I am now parting with it in accordance with the same law. When we rest in what the time requires, and manifest that submission, neither joy nor sorrow can enter. This is what the ancients called 'loosening the rope.' Some, though, are hung up and cannot loosen themselves. They are held fast by the bonds of material existence. But it is a long-acknowledged fact that no creatures can overcome Heaven. Why, then, should I hate my condition?"

Eventually another of the four, named Lai, fell ill, and lay gasping for breath, while his family stood weeping around. The fourth friend, Li, went to see him. "Leave!" he cried to the wife and children; "Go away! You hinder his decomposition." Then, leaning against the door, he said, "Truly, God is great! I wonder what he will make of you now. I wonder where you will be sent. Do you think he will make you into rat's liver or into the shoulders of a snake?"

"A son," answered Lai, "must go wherever his parents ask him. Nature is no other than a man's parents. If she asks me to die quickly, and I object, then I am a disobedient child. She can do me no wrong. The Dao gives me this form, this toil in adulthood, this tranquility in old age, and this rest in death. Surely that which is such a kind mediator of my life is the best mediator of my death. Suppose that the boiling metal in a smelting-pot were to bubble up and say, 'Make a sword out of me.' I think the caster would reject that metal as strange. If a sinner like myself were to say to God, 'Make of me a man, make of me a man,' I think he too would reject me as strange. The universe is the smelting-pot, and God is the caster. I will go wherever I am sent, to wake unconscious of the past, as a man wakes from a dreamless sleep."

## STUDY QUESTIONS

*Please answer all of the following questions for review.*

- 1. Explain the Hindu notions of the Self-God (Atman-Brahman) and "you are that".*
- 2. Explain the Hindu notions of reincarnation and the doctrine of karma.*
- 3. Explain the Hindu methods of action yoga and meditation yoga.*
- 4. Explain Sankara's strong monism and Ramanuja's weak monism.*
- 5. Explain the Buddhist Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path.*
- 6. Explain the Buddhist notions of improper questions and the poisoned arrow analogy.*
- 7. Explain the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination and no-self doctrine.*
- 8. Explain the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, and how do Zen koans lead to an awareness of emptiness?*
- 9. Explain the Confucian concepts of ritual conduct, humaneness, reciprocity, the superior person, child obedience and the five relationships*
- 10. Explain the Confucian concepts of good government and the five actions that lead to good government.*
- 11. Explain the Confucian seven steps of the Great Learning.*
- 12. Explain how Mencius and Kao differ on the issue of human goodness.*
- 13. Explain the Daoist notions of the Dao and return.*
- 14. Explain the Daoist notions of non-action, non-mind and good governing.*
- 15. Explain Lieh-tzu's view of happiness and death.*
- [Reading 1: Hinduism and Release Through Selfless Action]*
- 16. Explain the path of selfless action and what its consequences are.*
- [Reading 2: Buddhism and Zen Koans]*
- 17. What are the three questions asked by the students and the three answers given by the Zen masters?*
- [Reading 3: Confucianism and Hsun-tzu's view of Human Nature as Evil]*
- 18. Explain the point of Hsun-tzu's analogies of the crooked stick and blunt knife.*
- 19. According to Hsun-tzu, what is the origin of ritual conduct and righteousness?*
- [Reading 4: Daoism and Transformation]*
- 20. What are the main points of Chuang-Tzu's story of the four friends and transformation?*
- [Short Essay]*
- 21. Short essay: In a minimum of 150 words, pick one of the following Eastern Philosophy concepts and defend it against someone who might say that it is silly. Hinduism: Self-God; law of karma; yoga of action; yoga of meditation; weak or strong monism. Buddhism: nirvana; eightfold path; improper questions; no-self doctrine; doctrine of dependent origination; emptiness; Zen Koan system. Confucianism: ritual conduct; humaneness; principle of reciprocity; superior person;*

*child obedience; good government; seven steps of the Great Learning; Mencius, Kao or Hsun-Tzu on inherent human goodness. Daoism: the Dao; return; non-action; non-mind; minimal governing; Lieh-Tzu's view of happiness and death.*