

Confucius (Kong Fuzi), 551-479 BCE

Confucius was a sage, that is, a wise man. He was born in 551 BCE, during a period when China was divided into many small states, each with its own lord. This time is known as the “Warring States Period” because the different states were always fighting with each other. There were many attempts to overthrow the lords because they were often cruel to the people they ruled. It was a period of great chaos (disorder) and suffering among the people. During this time Confucius became the most influential teacher in Chinese history. As he traveled to many different regions, he spread his teachings and earned a well respected reputation.

Like other people during this difficult and dangerous time, Confucius, looked for ways to improve society and make it more peaceful. He believed that life would be better and safer if there was clear order, or harmony, in society. He also understood that rulers needed to govern more wisely to avoid or reduce bloodshed. Confucius believed that people should not use family connections to obtain government positions as many people did during that time. Instead, he thought that government officials should be well-educated, talented, honest, and fair. Confucius believed that government officials should live lives of virtue (be virtuous) so that the people they ruled would follow their example. Therefore, he developed a philosophy that established clear relationships between people in all aspects of their lives.

1. **Parents-Children.** Parents should love and care for their children. Children should respect and obey their parents. The children’s respect and devotion for their parents is often called “filial piety.”
2. **Ruler-Subjects.** A ruler should care for the people he governs. The people he rules (the subjects) should obey a ruler who takes care of them.
3. **Older brothers-Younger brothers.** Older brothers should care for younger brothers. Younger brothers should respect and obey older brothers.
4. **Husband-Wife.** Married people should live in harmony. A wife should obey her husband.
5. **Friend-Friend.** Friends should trust each other and treat each other well.

Do you notice a pattern? Those in power must take care of those who are weaker. Those who are weaker must respect and obey those who are in power. Those who are equal should treat each other equally. The primary and most important relationship is between parent and child. Children who understand their roles and duties to their parents will then be able to go into the world and understand their positions in society. It will be very difficult, however, for those who do not fulfill their primary duties (to their parents) to lead a successful life.

These relationships are based on traditional Chinese values, such as respect for elders (older people) and ancestor worship, which existed before the time of Confucius. This was an important reason why Chinese people were able to embrace the teachings of Confucius: they were already familiar with many of these ideas. The teachings of Confucius were rooted in things that the Chinese already believed in and practiced.

On the other hand, Confucianism also placed greater importance on learning, or scholarship. According to Confucianism, people can become government officials to help rule the land if they study hard, are just and fair, and can pass difficult exams. Under his philosophy, it is not as

important which family you are born into. It is much more important how smart and just you are. Therefore, Confucianism gives everyone the opportunity to become more powerful.

The main writings of Confucius are in the *Analects*, the sayings of Confucius. In addition to his own words, the ideas of Confucianism were developed by many other people who were the disciples of Confucius. These people accepted and spread his teachings. The most famous of these was Mencius. He was born almost 100 years after Confucius died. He tried to convince rulers in China that they should accept the teachings of Confucius.

In Confucianism, memorizing the sayings of Confucius was one of the most important rituals. That way, if someone spoke the first part of a saying of Confucius, the other people in the group (Confucians) would be able to complete it. If they could not, they would not be considered to be part of that group of "well-educated" people or "leaders."

Some of the sayings of Confucius were about the five relationships, but many others were examples of the way people should behave in order to keep harmony in society. These sayings often talked about people who were superior (better than other people) or inferior (worse than other people).

Here are two examples of famous sayings of Confucius:

- "What is a superior person? One who acts before he speaks, and afterwards speaks according to his actions."
- "Good government results when those who are near are made happy, and those who are far are attracted to it."

Laozi (Lao Tzu), Fourth Century BCE (?)

We do not know if Laozi was a real person or not. The name in Chinese means “Old Philosopher” or “Old Master.” This name may actually have represented several different writers who contributed to the *Daodejing*, or *The Way and Integrity Classic*, which was the earliest set of teachings associated with Daoism. This person or persons lived during a period when China was divided into many small states, each with its own lord. This time is known as the “Warring States Period,” because the different states were always fighting, or warring, with each other and their lords. There were many attempts to overthrow the lords because they were often cruel to the people they ruled. It was a period of great chaos and suffering among the people. Daoism was in part a reason to Confucianism. Daoists didn’t agree with the idea that active, involved leaders brought social harmony.



Like other people during this difficult and dangerous time, Laozi looked for ways to improve society and help comfort people. According to legend, he wanted to leave the problems in China in order to live out the end of his life in peace and quiet in Central Asia (west of China). A border guard asked him to write down his teachings before leaving China, and so Laozi composed the *Daodejing*, which lays out the main ideas of what later became known as Daoism.

According to Daoism, people have problems because they do not understand the natural world they live in and how it behaves. Therefore, the basic goal of Daoism is for people to understand the Dao (the way) of nature and behave according to it. Those who follow the Dao achieve mental clarity, power, and “inner peace.” Daoists believed that people should avoid interfering with nature or each other. They should be like water and simply let things flow in a natural way.

It is difficult to describe the Dao in words. In fact, when we put things from nature into words, we remove ourselves from the experience of reality, according to Daoism. Therefore, Daoists (people who practice Daoism) say that instead of using words, the best way to experience nature is by observing it and being in tune with it. For example, when we watch waves at the beach, we do not judge waves and say, “This one is right and beautiful” or “That one is wrong and ugly.” Nature is just what it is; it does not make mistakes. There is no “good” or “bad” in nature. These are ideas that people made up to describe how things affect them.

Therefore, it is easier to explain Daoism with the yin yang symbol. Many people (especially in Western countries) tend to separate ideas in nature into opposites like good and evil, black and white, or life and death. Daoists see nature as being whole (the complete outside circle in the yin yang symbol), and everything inside of it as being connected and as part of the whole. The “yin” is represented by the black in the symbol. It also represents water, the moon, and earth, as well as the quiet, soft, and feminine qualities. The “yang” is represented by the white in the symbol. It also represents fire, the sun, and heaven, as well as the dynamic, hard, and masculine qualities. Nature is always moving and flowing, and the yin and yang work together. For example, black and white are only seen in relation to the other, part of each other, and flowing into each other.

The Daoist belief system was accepted in China in part because it reflected earlier philosophies and legends. For example, according to a very famous legend in China, one of the mythical founders of China faced a problem about how to deal with a huge dam that was leaking. Rather than trying to block it, he formed channels to “naturally” drain the water away, thus creating China’s landscape.

Aside from Laozi’s writings in the *Daodejing*, the philosophy of Daoism is based on the ideas of other people who accepted and spread the teachings of Daoism. The most famous of these was Zhuangzi (or Master Zhuang), who was born perhaps 100 years after Laozi died and who wrote *Zhuangzi*.

In Daoism, meditation and tuning into nature are the most important rituals. Daoists also memorize the main writings of Daoism, especially the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. That way, if someone begins speaking the first part of a saying from one of these books, the other people in the group (Daoists) are able to complete it. If they cannot, they are not considered to be part of that group of Daoists.

Examples of two famous Daoist sayings:

- “Who can make the muddy water clear? Let it be still and it will gradually become clear.”
- “That which goes against the Dao will come to an early end.”

The Buddha (born Siddhartha Gautama), 563-483 BCE

Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince in Northern India. According to legend, it was predicted at Siddhartha's birth that he would become either a great ruler or a great teacher. His father, the king, wanted Siddhartha to succeed him as ruler. For this reason, his father tried to prevent him from seeing or experiencing anything sad, which might cause him to become religious and teach others. Therefore, Siddhartha enjoyed his early years in the palace in luxury without knowing about things such as old age, sickness, or death. Eventually, the young prince decided to go outside of the palace. There, for the first time, he saw an old person with wrinkled skin who had difficulty walking. Siddhartha understood that he himself would also become old. He also saw a sick person and a dead person. All this made Siddhartha feel much suffering. During another trip, he saw a holy man who appeared to be happy and at peace. Siddhartha learned that this person had given up his home and everything he owned. The holy person was trying to find wisdom and peacefulness by living a pure and simple life.

From then on, Siddhartha searched for a way to end suffering and become happy. He decided to follow the path of a holy person. He gave up everything he owned. He left his wife and young child and a life of luxury in the palace. He traveled around India for years, but he still did not find a way to end suffering. Finally, he decided to sit under a tree and meditate (become quiet and relaxed and clear his mind of thoughts) until he became enlightened (understood the truth about the world and such things as why there is suffering and how to end it). After meditating for several hours, he became enlightened and became known as the "Buddha," or the one who knows the truth.

In order to share the truths he found with others, the Buddha became a teacher. (Remember: this is one of the career paths predicted for him at birth and the one that his father did not want him to take.) There are two main beliefs of Buddhism, that is, the teachings of the Buddha and his followers.

One is the "Four Noble Truths," which the Buddha discovered when he meditated beneath the tree. These truths are:

- Life is full of suffering from birth to death.
- People suffer because they desire (try to get) things that do not last, for example, money and possessions.
- The way to end suffering is to stop desiring things.
- The way to get rid of desire is to follow the "Eightfold Path."

According to Buddhism, the "Eightfold Path" means to lead a good life. People who follow this path are freed from suffering and gain happiness. These steps are:

- Right understanding. It is important to be certain that you understand the teachings of the Buddha correctly

- Right thought. Think thoughts that are pure and good.
- Right speech. Speak words that are truthful and not harmful.
- Right action. Treat people well, as you would like to be treated.
- Right work. Do not harm others as you earn a living.
- Right effort. Keep trying to become a better person; stop bad habits.
- Right mindfulness. Be mindful (or aware) of what you are doing and what is going on around you; always think about how you live
- Right meditation. Meditate correctly each day to clear your mind of desires and be able to find peace and truth

When and why did Buddhism arrive in China? Buddhism probably first entered China along the “silk roads,” that is, the system of trade routes that connected China to lands farther west as far as the Mediterranean sea and Europe. Trade on the silk roads goes back thousands of years. By about 100 BCE, Buddhist missionaries began traveling on the routes along with traders. Trade routes opened contact and communication between people and places. In addition to goods, people and ideas spread along the trade routes.

By 68 CE, a Chinese Han emperor asked some advisers to visit India to learn more about this “western religion,” that is, Indian religion. They returned to China with Buddhist monks. New religions and beliefs often become popular during difficult times when people are searching for answers to why there is suffering. When dynasties were ending in China there was much unrest, and the Chinese tended to embrace Buddhism more. For example, at the end of the Han dynasty, Buddhism became more popular.