

# How to Live a Good Life: A Guide to Choosing Your Personal Philosophy

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A collection of essays by fifteen philosophers presenting a thoughtful, introductory guide to choosing a philosophy for living an examined and meaningful life. A VINTAGE ORIGINAL

Socrates famously said "the unexamined life is not worth living," but what does it mean to truly live philosophically?

This thought-provoking, wide-ranging collection brings together essays by fifteen leading philosophers reflecting on what it means to live according to a philosophy of life. From Eastern philosophies (Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism) and classical Western philosophies (such as Aristotelianism and Stoicism), to the four major religions, as well as contemporary philosophies (such as existentialism and effective altruism), each contributor offers a lively, personal account of how they find meaning in the practice of their chosen philosophical tradition.

Together, the pieces in *How to Live a Good Life* provide not only a beginner's guide to choosing a life philosophy but also a timely portrait of what it means to live an examined life in the twenty-first century.

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Ancient Philosophies from the East

Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism

Eastern philosophies-particularly three of the most well known: Buddhism, Confucianism,

and Daoism-tend to have a reputation in the West for being all about yoga and meditation. Although these are parts of what they are about, the essays by Owen Flanagan, Bryan Van Norden, and Robin R. Wang show that this conception is overly simplified, incomplete, and misleading. The risk of cherry-picking bits and pieces-such as meditation or yoga-without a fuller understanding of the underlying philosophy is that we end up with commercialized cults of the self, sacrificing credit cards and calories to the Yoga Fashion Gods Inc., which is a far cry from what the Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi teach. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism are philosophies of life that present primarily practical guides for ethical behavior.

Buddhism is, by some estimates, currently the fourth largest "religion" in the world, after Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, accounting for around 500 million people, or nearly 7 percent of the world's population.<sup>1</sup> It is hard to say how many people follow Confucianism and Daoism, because when polls are done in Korea and China, for example, only a small percentage say they officially belong to the "religion" of Confucianism, but most conform to and enact a Confucian way of life. Confucianism is more a cultural and philosophical affiliation than a religious one, and the ideas and texts of Confucians continue to exert deep cultural influences on billions of people.

The popular practices of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism could have been included as religions in Group III, but we think they merit their own section, not only because they originated in Asia, but also because they do not worship deities in the same ways as more orthodox religious traditions (such as Hinduism). They often do make reference to deities or spiritual entities, and there are religious rites and temples associated with them, but intellectuals in each tradition typically regard them as "skillful means," that is, expedients for justifying or explaining the philosophical teachings to people. Moreover, their focus is on the individual, or the individual within society, rather than a god, and, as Flanagan argues, Buddhism in particular lends itself well to secularization for those looking for a spiritual and ethical, but not necessarily religious, philosophy.

Siddhartha Gautama, more commonly known as "the Buddha," was an Indian prince who lived around 500-400 BCE. At the age of twenty-nine, he traveled away from his palace to meet his subjects and was shocked by the sickness and suffering he witnessed. He became an ascetic and at thirty-five meditated under a bodhi tree for forty-nine days and, according to the legend, became enlightened. He set about spreading his wisdom on how to achieve enlightenment. Like Daoism and Stoicism (which we will come to soon), Buddhism aims to relieve pain and suffering. Key sources of our existential pain are emotions such as anger, resentment, and blame, which inflict suffering on ourselves as well as others. Buddhists check, or as Flanagan puts it, "deflate" their ego by exercising virtues including compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. "The ethical imperative," Flanagan says, "is always to love, to substitute compassion and love whenever and wherever there is suffering, violence, cruelty, and hate." This is part of the path to releasing ourselves from our attachments and freeing ourselves from the endless cycle of rebirth, so that we may find a state of serenity and, ultimately, nirvana. It is not always as simple as it sounds, though-and Flanagan talks us through the problem of whether a Buddhist would kill Hitler, a thought experiment that might for some end in a brain cramp.

About the same time that Buddhism was flourishing in India, China was having its own golden age of philosophy. Between 770 and 221 BCE there was intense interstate warfare in China, but also vibrant intellectual debate, as thinkers argued over the solutions to China's problems. This spurred a widespread enthusiasm for education and learning, leading to what was called the period of the "Hundred Schools of Thought," as new ideas flowed and flourished. This is when Confucianism and Daoism developed, along with Mohism (a form of impartial consequentialism); the School of Names (concerned with the philosophy of language and dialectics); Legalism (a philosophy of government based on clear laws that are strictly enforced); and the School of Yin-yang (which sought to understand and potentially control the course of history through the use of concepts such as yin, yang, and the Five Phases).

Kongzi, more commonly known in the West as Confucius, advocated compassion for others and personal integrity. Kongzi claimed that we have special obligations to those tied to us by personal relations such as kinship. This emphasis on filial piety is one of the best-known aspects of Confucianism. However, Confucians stress that we should have compassion not only for those close to us, but for "all under Heaven," since we are all interdependent. The Confucian way is to treat everyone as if they were our own siblings, parents, or children, because we exist within relationships, and good relationships make for a good life.

Compassion for others is a manifestation of benevolence, one of the four Confucian cardinal virtues, along with righteousness (integrity in the face of temptations), wisdom, and propriety (skillfulness in following social conventions such as etiquette and ritual). Confucianism is similar to Buddhism in advocating compassion. However, Buddhism sees attachments as the source of suffering, while Confucianism argues that a good life is one rich in healthy attachments, to family, friends, and humans in general. Confucians and Buddhists also disagree on the nature of the self. For the Buddhist, we are impermanent and without a fixed essence. A Confucian says that to deny the fact of individual existence, "is like closing one's eyes so that one does not see one's nose-but the nose is still there where it belongs," as Bryan Van Norden notes.

Another influential philosophy to emerge from the Hundred Schools of Thought was Daoism-sometimes spelled Taoism in English, but the Chinese characters are the same-or the "School of the Way," founded by the sages Laozi and Zhuangzi.<sup>2</sup> Whereas Confucianism is concerned with social harmony, Daoism is interested in the individual living in harmony with nature and the natural flow of the universe. As Robin Wang explains, we align ourselves with the Dao (the way) by putting our mind on a diet. We dig out the tangled weeds of anxiety and worry that clog up our mind, and clearing them out leaves some empty space for illumination and acuity. We prepare for and accept uncertainty, and go with the flow of the world, but focus on taking control of our body and nurturing it, like a garden. Happiness comes not from nirvana or relationships necessarily, but rather from trusting and following the flow and, as Mama Wang tells her daughters, when we "eat well, exercise daily, get plenty of sleep, and do well in school." Daoism's ultimate vision, however, is a spiritual transformation that brings the finite human life into an infinite cosmos.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050," Pew Research Center (April 2, 2015): 102. <https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/NAzdCZ6WyZF6XmrXfzi-Kq?domain=assets.pewresearch.org>.

<sup>2</sup>Laozi is also sometimes known as Lao-Tzu, Lao-Tze, or Li Er and means "Old Master." Zhuangzi, meaning "Master Zhuang," is also sometimes known as Chuang-Tzu or Zhuang Zhou.

## Chapter One

### Buddhism

Owen Flanagan

Let me tell you about the occasion on which I first vividly experienced Buddhism as both an utterly alien and extremely attractive form of life, simultaneously unimaginable given that I was already well socialized in another way of world-making, and yet worth emulating if I could change myself completely, becoming a different kind of person with an entirely different economy of heart and mind. Since then I have been trying to become more like that person, to absorb some Buddhist wisdom and Buddhist habits of the heart. I am still very much a hybrid being.

It was March 2000, and I was in Dharamsala, India, a hill station in the Himalayan foothills, for four days of meetings with the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso; some of his fellow Buddhists; and a group of Western scientists, mostly psychologists and neuroscientists, to discuss the topic of destructive emotions and how to overcome them (see Goleman 2003 for a report on these meetings).

It became clear after a day or so of talks that Tibetan Buddhists believe that anger, resentment, and their suite of emotions are categorically bad, always unwarranted, wrong, and "unwholesome," as they are inclined to say. That was surprising by itself. We, denizens of the North Atlantic, don't categorically dismiss anger as inappropriate, but we do draw limits around its expression or magnitude, such as "Don't get too angry" or "Don't get so angry." Wrath, after all, is considered by Christians to be a deadly sin. Most of us do not think that we should never get angry (even if we could show such self-restraint) or that anger is always wrong. For us, justifiable anger demonstrates that one sees and cares about something genuinely valuable. Everyday anger and annoyance only show that one is human. Minimally, we expect and tolerate a certain amount of these emotions. Then there is the fact that most people I know were raised to think it okay, permissible, possibly sometimes required, to feel and express outrage. Righteous anger is something we ought sometimes to experience and express, something that certain people or states of affairs deserve.

I know that there are coping mechanisms and rules of decorum—"counting to ten," sublimation, or "tamping it down"—norms that keep us from expressing anger or that work to contain it, but not experiencing anger at all seems to me unnatural, weird, not human. Again, self-work to keep from getting pissy over small frustrations makes good sense and is certainly possible. But except for the rare bird of saintly even temperament, never experiencing anger—at the cosmos or the gods or especially evil people for their awfulness—seems close to a psychological impossibility. But then there was this kicker, even more mind-boggling: these Buddhists also believed that anger could be eliminated in mortals, that there are practices that actually work so that it is possible not to experience anger, practices that can extirpate anger, cleanse the soul of tendencies to anger.

I found myself posing this thought experiment to the Dalai Lama. Imagine that one were to find oneself in a public space—a park, a movie theater—where one realizes that one is seated next to Hitler—or Stalin or Pol Pot or Mao—early in the execution of the genocides they actually perpetrated. We, my people, think it would be appropriate first to feel moral anger, possibly outrage at Hitler et al., and second, that it would be okay, possibly required, to kill them, supposing one had the means. What about you Tibetan Buddhists?

The Dalai Lama turned to consult the high lamas who were seated behind him, as usual, like a lion's pride. After a few minutes of whispered conversation in Tibetan with his team, the Dalai Lama turned back to our group and explained that one should kill Hitler (actually with some martial fanfare, in the way—to mix cultural practices—a samurai warrior might). It is stopping a bad, a very bad, karmic causal chain. So, "Yes, kill him. But don't be angry."

What could this mean? How did it make sense to think of one human being killing another, being motivated to kill another human being, without feeling, without activating the suite of reactive attitudes such as anger, resentment, blame?

The thought is that Hitler is an unfortunate node in the way the world is unfolding. He did not choose to be the evil person he is. He deserves compassion, not anger. And he must die for reasons of compassion: compassion for him and all those who might suffer his awfulness.

Stoics, excellent warriors, thought something similar, that when effective action is required against an enemy, including his elimination, emotions like fear and anger get in the way, immobilize, cause one to under- or overreach, and undermine skillfully achieving one's aims. In *De Ira*, and in a direct challenge to Aristotle, Seneca writes: "It is easier to banish dangerous emotions than to rule them." The mature person is disciplined and thoughtful, whereas the angry person is undisciplined and sloppy: "anger is excited by empty matters hovering on the outskirts of the case."

Seneca, like other Stoics, thought that we confuse the occasional necessity of severe punishment and war with the necessity of anger. Aristotle, he says, claims that anger is useful for the soldier, although not for the general. But good soldiers, good Stoic warriors are never angry; otherwise they make a mess of what sometimes sadly needs to be done. Seneca's recommendation for anger: "Extirpate root and branch. . . . What can moderation

have to do with an evil habit?"

I came to understand later that the requirement to extirpate anger in the Buddhist and Stoic cases has to do with the primacy of ethics in both philosophies. The aim of ethics is to do good, to reduce pain and suffering (dukkha), and, if possible, to bring happiness in its stead. Anger, at least in one standard mode, aims to hurt, to do harm, to inflict suffering. And one should never aim to do that. Anger is the handmaiden of the rapacious ego that demands satisfaction, and the grasping, rapacious ego that seeks to destroy what lies in its way is the problem, the main cause of suffering, not the solution.

In the Buddhist case, there is an additional reason to oppose anger that has to do with a uniquely Buddhist metaphysics of human agency. Hitler and his ilk are bad nodes in the way the universe is unfolding. He must be stopped. That is a practical imperative. But we who are positioned to stop him, and duty-bound to do so, must do so with love and compassion. Hitler, after all, could have been one's own self, one's child, or one's parent. The ethical imperative is always to love, to substitute compassion and love whenever and wherever there is suffering, violence, cruelty, and hate. This impulse to live compassionately, to try to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings is the key Buddhist idea. It is put forward as the only sensible response to the universal predicament of suffering. Where there is suffering, try to relieve it, and to bring happiness instead.

In the fertile spiritual ecology of northern India in the fifth century BCE, there was a plethora of spiritual practices promoting solutions to the problem of samsara, the cycle of birth and death. In the first instance, samsara refers to the simple fact that whatever arises or is born eventually dies, decays, and disperses. Each and every thing—plant, animal, and person—is born and dies. Each one of us will lose others whom we love and be lost to people who love us. Knowing even at the moment of birth that the precious and innocent child will suffer the slings and arrows of fortune, and will eventually grow old and die, shadows the happiness of welcoming a newborn into the world.

Other Books

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