

## **CONFUCINISM**

Confucius was a teacher who lived from 551 – 479 BC. This was a time of devastating civil war and social unrest in China, so it is understandable that Confucius's goal was to create a peaceful, stable society. His ideas formed a social philosophy that focused on the importance of how people relate to one another. His teaching defined the necessary hierarchy of duties and responsibilities between individuals to achieve harmony and stability in all social and political relationships.

Some of his basic ideas were that education overcomes ignorance and lack of harmony, that people are good, and that they live in a network of social and political relationships. The ideal ruler is an educated, moral person who guides society through the example of his own good conduct.

Confucius stressed five relationships as key to a stable, harmonious society: ruler to subject, father to son, husband to wife, older brother to younger brother, and friend to friend. The first four relationships are unequal; the first person is superior to the second. The fifth, friendship, however, is equal and should be based on love and mutual respect. If we remember the unsettled times in which he lived, Confucius' emphasis on high ethical standards and correct relationships becomes very understandable. Duty, combined with sincerity, was the path to harmony.

Confucius thought of himself as preserving the old ways which had been lost during troubled times. Yet, in fact, he introduced a whole new way of looking at society. The fundamental principle in his ideas is that only virtue gives one the right to rule, not heredity. Furthermore, virtue could be acquired through education. These ideas were very different from those which had existed up until then.

Confucianism has defined the traditional values and ideas of proper behavior in China. Although it is out of favor in communist China, it lives on in Taiwan. Confucianism has also profoundly influenced traditional values and ways of life in Korea and Japan

## DAOISM

Daoism was developed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE by Lao-tzu as a way of thinking about man's relationship to nature and the universe. Rooted in the idea that the "Dao", or way, is the principle by which everything works, the life force of all natural things. Daoists are against all organizations, including formal education. Their goal is to create a society in harmony with the world, which can be achieved if people follow the Dao. Daoists believe in non-action, not interfering in the affairs of others, both on the part of individuals and states. Because they consider ambition and desire to be the causes of social unrest, they stress simplicity, humility, quiet, plainness, and peace. To epitomize the power of the "Dao", they use the symbol of water: Water seems weak, always seeks the easiest way, always flows downhill, yet will wear away stone.

While Confucianism forms an idealistic way of thinking about governing, Daoism rejects government altogether. For Daoists, the ideal ruler is one who does not govern. Daoism became the counterbalance to Confucianism, Daoism stressed harmony with nature, while Confucianism stressed harmony between people. Throughout the millennia, the Chinese have found that something of each philosophy answered their own needs.

With the victory of communism in mainland China in 1949 and especially the cultural revolution of the late 1960s, Daoism suffered tremendously. Because the government objected to both old traditions and religion, it opposed Taoism. In the 1980s some Taoist institutions were rebuilt and Daoist worship resumed. Meanwhile, Daoist practice flourished in Chinese communities elsewhere, especially on Taiwan.

In addition to its immense contribution to Chinese society, Daoism attracted the attention of Europeans and North Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ideas from the early Daoist texts became popular. So did physical exercises such as T'ai Chi a Daoist-influenced martial arts/

## **BUDDHISM**

A religion that traces its history back to the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (560c. – 480 BC), an Indian prince. He became so troubled by human suffering (particularly poverty, disease, old age, and death) that he abandoned his privileged life to become a wandering monk seeking a way to end all suffering. After many years of meditation he awakened to the truth and became known as the Buddha, or enlightened one. Buddhism was formulated to teach other people how to overcome suffering and reach personal enlightenment.

Buddhism, the most recent system to spread over China, was introduced from India in the first century AD. It is the only major Chinese philosophy which is not concerned with governing, but rather with individual behavior. Buddhism actually controlled all aspects of daily life. A Buddhist does not eat meat, does not kill, believes in rebirth, and believes that how a person lives affects his or her future existence.

According to Buddhist teachings, there is a universal spirit of which every living thing is a part. A person experiences continuous re-birth or reincarnations, until he or she reaches a state of enlightenment – or the realization that worldly desires and attachments are an illusion causing only suffering. However, one's fate can be controlled by human efforts. A person who practices good moral conduct, discipline, and meditation moves upward through successive existences to an ultimate reward, "nirvana", or nonexistence, ending the chain of painful rebirths.

Siddhartha Gautama based his teaching on the "Four Noble Truths":

1. Life entails suffering
2. Suffering is due to vanity and attachment to material objects
3. Suffering can be stopped if you let go of the attachment
4. Suffering can be overcome by leading a disciplined, moral life and by practicing deep meditation

Buddhism spread rapidly through the Asian continent and was practiced throughout Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka as well as Indonesia, China, Japan, and Korea. Today it is practiced worldwide. Buddhism became popular, particularly in times of political and social unrest because it focused on liberation from the world of suffering.

## SHINTO

Shinto, or the “Way of the Kami”, is a belief system deeply rooted in Japanese culture that attempts to explain the relationship between human beings and the forces of nature. Shinto is so entwined with the Japanese culture that there are very few native Japanese who don't practice some aspect of that ancient belief (one book I read said about 92%). The flip side of that is the fact that it is so associated with Japanese culture that it is hardly practiced anywhere else in the world other than by Japanese people living in other lands.

Shinto has no founder and no sacred texts. It didn't even have a name until the introduction of Buddhism in the 6<sup>th</sup> century made it necessary to distinguish the two. It is polytheistic and its gods known as *kami* are worshiped. For believers in Shinto, everything that exist is inhabited by a *kami*. Unlike other religions there are no absolutes in Shinto and nobody is presumed to be perfect. Human beings are considered to be fundamentally good, so evil must be caused by an evil *kami*. The purpose of Shinto rituals is to drive away these evil spirits through self-purification, prayers, and offerings.

The *kami* inhabit special trees, boulders, mountains, waterfalls, and other similar natural objects as well as gods and goddesses, and occasionally, extraordinary human beings. Not only is the *kami* an object of worship, but so is the place it resides.

Shinto, like many of the other Asian religions, is focused on living a good life--one of simplicity, beauty, purity, and gratitude, honor, and respect for others. There is little or no focus on an afterlife or what happens after physical death, so modern Shinto often observe in combination with Buddhism, which deals with those questions. This is another aspect of Asian religions; most of them are very accepting of other faiths, and allow, if not encourage, their followers to combine the beliefs and practices of that religion with others.

<http://teachingyourmiddleschooler.blogspot.com/2011/04/world-religions-shinto.html>

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