

Lecture 8

Confucianism: Chinese Exotericism

In the last of these written lectures, my focus was Buddhism. I spent a few minutes introducing you to the founder of that religion, Siddhartha Gautama, but then the majority of our time was devoted to explaining basic Buddhist teachings. Like every religion, Buddhism is a combination of doctrine and method. Its doctrinal component is summed up in the first three of the Four Noble Truths: namely, that (1) all life is *dukkha* or suffering, that (2) the cause of this suffering is *tanha* or selfish craving, and that (3) the solution to suffering is *nirodha* or the cessation of craving. Buddhist method, on the other hand, is contained in the steps of the fourth Noble Truth, that is in the Eightfold Path, which consists of (1) right view, (2) right intention, (3) right speech, (4) right action, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) right mindfulness, and (8) right concentration. The point of all this—the spiritual goal of Buddhist doctrine and method—is a state called *Nirvāna*, a state of radical emptiness, which the Buddhists typically refuse to define, describing it only in negative terms as the placeless place we shall go when the flames of craving have been extinguished.

As I've said before, Buddhism serves very well as a sort of link or transition as we make our move from South Asian to East Asian religions. Born and raised in India, it was soon carried abroad by missionaries to other countries. Historically, the most important of these other lands was China, where Buddhism arrived sometime in the first century after Christ—that is, about five hundred years after the death of the Buddha. By the seventh century of the Christian era (the 600s A.D.), Buddhism had become one of the most influential religions not only in China but throughout East Asia in general, including such countries as Thailand, Korea, and Japan. It was not, however, the only religion in that part of the world. When Buddhists first arrived in China, they discovered two very important, and already long-established, Chinese traditions—namely, Confucianism and Taoism—and it's these religions I'll be talking about in this lecture and the next.

First of all, though, let me say just a couple of things about East Asian religions in general. As I've explained before, one way to get a handle on the three major families of historical religions (South Asian, East Asian, and Western) is to see each of them as having set out to solve one of the main problems of life. In the case of South Asia, the problem is that of personal identity: Who am I? What is the *self*? The stress on meditation and contemplative disciplines that I've called your

attention to in both Hinduism and Buddhism fits in with this deep-seated interest in plumbing the depths of human consciousness. As we turn now to East Asia, however, we're going to find that a greater emphasis is placed on the problem or question of *neighbor*: How are we supposed to relate to other people? What is the ideal form of human society? The religions that come from this part of the world tend, in other words, to be somewhat more social and less psychological in their orientation. In fact there is so much stress on the social issue, especially in the case of Confucianism, that it may at first be hard for you to realize that this really *is* a religion, and not simply an ethical code or moral philosophy. As the Chinese see it, however, there's nothing more important than our relationships with other people when it comes to laying the groundwork for our relation to Heaven. The Christian will remember in this connection Christ's words: "Whatsoever you do unto the least of these my brethren [that is, to other people], you do also to Me [that is, God]" (Matthew 25:40).

The social emphasis of East Asia can be seen among other things in the way the religions fit together in that part of the world. In the Western world, as many of you undoubtedly know from experience, religious traditions are mutually exclusive. Even the Christian or Jew or Muslim who is a perennialist (let's say) and who is therefore open to the truth of several different religions, nevertheless still practices only one. He doesn't join a church *and* a synagogue *and* a mosque simultaneously or try to follow the rules of all three. (Some wag has quipped that it would be nice to be both a Christian and a Muslim: that way you could not only drink alcohol, which Islam forbids but Christianity permits, but you could also have four wives, which Christianity forbids but Islam permits. But this *isn't* the way things work in the West!) When it comes to East Asia, however, the situation in this respect is very different. Traditionally, many Chinese would have been both Confucians and Taoists simultaneously without in any way seeing these as conflicting loyalties. In fact, though I've referred to these traditions as if they were two separate religions, it would be a bit more accurate to picture them as two sides of one coin or as interlocking pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, for what you actually have in this case are the exoteric (or outer) and the esoteric (or inner) dimensions of a single great spiritual teaching. Confucianism, which we're discussing today, is the exoteric aspect, and Taoism (which we'll look at next time) is the esoteric aspect.

Confucianism, like Buddhism, began with a particular man, and it's from his name—Confucius—that the name of the religion is derived. Confucius is actually a westernized form of the Chinese K'ung Fu-Tzu. This is actually a title and not simply a proper name, and it means the

“Great Master Kung”. Born in 551 B.C. in what is now the province of Shantung, the master died in the year 479 B.C. As you can see, he was an almost exact contemporary of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. Little needs to be said about Confucius’s life. Compared to the lives of figures like the Buddha or Christ, his career seems to have been remarkably unremarkable: no stories of miracles, no death-defying austerities, nothing that made him stand out from the crowd. The picture we get instead is of a very simple, self-effacing man. If there was anything extraordinary about him, it was the fact that he seems to have been one of the most gifted and influential teachers that ever lived, a sort of one-man university, who was able to instruct his students in everything from history, literature, and mathematics to music and athletics. As for his teaching style, it was apparently like that of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, who instructed his pupils not by lectures but through informal conversation and questioning.

What we do know is that when Confucius first arrived on the scene, the social situation in China was in a very bad state. Blood feuds and mass murders ordered by rival barons were the rule of the day, and we read of massacres involving upwards of a half-million people each. The effect of Confucius’s teachings was by no means immediate, but in time they came to assist in overcoming this gruesome state of anarchy. In fact, by the second century B.C. (around 300 years after his death), his writings had been adopted as official training manuals for all Chinese government officials, and his basic principles have continued to dominate Chinese social thought, in spite of efforts by the ruling communist party to suppress them, right down to today. Self-effacing though he was, Confucius remains without doubt the single most important religious thinker for roughly a quarter of the world’s population.

His teaching centers above all on the concept of *Li*, a word sometimes rendered into English as “proper comportment”. Understood in this way *Li* is primarily a matter of manners, and it refers to the way a person should act in various social situations. Every culture, of course, has some code of manners or etiquette. Think of things like which fork you use first at an elegant dinner party, or the proper order of address when you’re introducing people to each other, or which foot goes where in ballroom dancing, or the way a gentleman opens a door for a lady, or the use of phrases like “Yes, Ma’am” and “Yes, Sir”, and you’ll have a pretty good idea of the basic meaning of *Li*.

But that’s just the beginning. There’s actually much more to this Chinese idea, a sort of “supernatural” dimension. In our culture, most people would say that the various ways of acting I

just mentioned are simply matters of convention. Most contemporary Americans would probably agree that politeness is important, but the specific ways you express politeness are—for us—purely arbitrary. There’s nothing “sacred” (for example) about which fork you use for your salad, and if you forget whom to introduce first, it’s no big deal. For Confucius, however, it *was* a big deal, for there was nothing at all random about the manners he prescribed. Confucians teach instead that proper social conduct on what we might call the “horizontal” level, far from being a merely conventional and subjective phenomenon, is intimately and “vertically” linked with fundamental patterns of order that permeate the entire universe. What I say or do, when I say or do it, to whom I say or do it, where I say or do it: all these dimensions of my behavior are connected to certain “vibrations” or “resonances”, which together constitute an overarching web of cosmic harmony.

Speaking of “harmony”, I might insert here just a quick comment on music. A large portion of Confucius’s teaching centered on the importance of the arts in general and on music in particular. Confucius believed that certain kinds of music could assist in harmonizing the soul and stabilizing society. “The noble person,” he said, “tries to create harmony in the human heart by a rediscovery of human nature and tries to promote music as a means to the perfection of human culture.” Like the Greek philosopher Plato, Confucius taught that the melody, rhythm, and tone (what we would call the “key”) of a piece of music have the power to bring about definite transformations in human consciousness and that music—independently of the lyrics that may accompany it—is therefore “good” or “bad” depending on its effects on the soul. This will seem to most of you reading this lecture a very odd idea; people in our culture today tend to have the same basic attitude toward music and the arts as they do toward the idea of “manners”, namely, that they’re entirely a question of taste and opinion. We have the idea that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” and that aesthetics is therefore strictly subjective. I’m probably not going to be able to change your minds about this, but you should nonetheless know that not only Confucius and Plato but numerous saints and sages in many different religions have all thought otherwise, teaching instead that there is such a thing as *objective* Beauty and attempting to help people develop the “eyes” and other “organs” they need to see, hear, and touch it. This is why every spiritual tradition places so much emphasis on beauty and sacred art. As I explained in Lecture 2, beauty may be regarded as a “configuration” of God and as a means of bringing the affective or emotional side of our nature into conformity with Him.

In any case, what I've called the "supernatural aspect" of *Li* can be seen more clearly in a related, but somewhat different, meaning of the concept. *Li* means comportment or manners, but it can also be translated as "ritual" or "rite". If you're a Christian, I suggest you think for a moment about Baptism and Holy Communion, because this will give you a good idea of the larger, and distinctly more spiritual, dimension of *Li*. Each of the Christian sacraments requires the use of specific physical elements, which—in the rites themselves—are accompanied by particular words and gestures. If the rite isn't carried out in the proper manner, in precisely the way commanded by Christ, it's not going to be valid or efficacious. You can't baptize with Diet Coke, and you can't use chocolate for Holy Communion, and in both cases the specific words are essential: Jesus Himself says in the Bible that one is to baptize "in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19), and the communion service must include the words (among others): "Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you" (Matthew 26:26; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:24). The same sort of thing is true in Confucianism, except that in this religion it's the entire network of social relationships that serves as the "sacrament".

Consider what Confucius called the "Five Constant Relationships". These are relationships between human beings in which a specific pattern of conduct is prescribed for how a given pair of people should relate to each other. The pairs are as follows: ruler and subject, husband and wife, parent and child, elder sibling and younger sibling, and elder friend and younger friend. In each case the relationship is between a person who occupies a position of authority and another person who occupies a position of subordination. The relationships are in every case asymmetrical, and therefore each party in these pairs has different but reciprocal duties. Rulers should be benevolent, and subjects should be loyal; husbands should be caring, and wives obedient; parents should be nurturing, and children reverential; elder siblings should be gentle, and younger siblings respectful; and elder friends should be considerate, and younger friends deferential.

Now as you can see at once, the Confucian vision of a good society isn't exactly what you'd call "politically correct" in terms of contemporary American standards, for there's nothing at all democratic or egalitarian about it. It's instead thoroughly hierarchical, and in this respect—I should add—it's like virtually every other traditional, pre-modern culture (including the Christian). At the same time, however, it's utterly *unlike* what people in today's western cultures have been taught to assume is the best way to structure a society. This is a hugely important difference, and I would like to take some time to consider it carefully.

If you're anything like me, you've probably been taught to be very suspicious of hierarchical social visions, and if asked to say why we're suspicious we'd probably point (among other things) to how easy it is for a social hierarchy to give rise to oppression and the abuse of authority. As the Confucian sees it, however, our modern sensitivity to human rights and the dangers of hierarchy, while not without value, is too often the result of grossly overestimating the importance of the individual. Based on the ideas of Rousseau and other modern political theorists, we in the West have grown up with the notion that civilizations originally came about through a "social contract" voluntarily entered into by free and separate individuals, and we think that the measure of a given society's goodness is its ability to promote its citizens' equal rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (to quote the Declaration of Independence). For the followers of Confucius, however, this is preposterous. They would argue on the contrary that there's no such thing as a true human being apart from society. Society isn't a construction of selves; on the contrary, the self is a construction or creation of society. It's a single, slender filament in a much larger web or network, and it's the network alone that gives it meaning.

You can see this idea even in the order of East Asian names. In the West it's the individual's given name that comes first and then his family name. You ask me my name, and I tell you that I'm "James Cutsinger". In a country like China, however, it's the family name that comes first, for the individual is defined by the group—and also (I might add) by his job: if I were to give a lecture in Beijing and a Chinese colleague were introducing me, he would probably say something like: "Please join with me in welcoming the University of South Carolina's professor of religion Cutsinger, James." You see: my employer, my profession, and my family all take precedence over little old me—because, in fact, I wouldn't *be* me were it not for these larger defining contexts. Can you hear an echo of the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* that I was discussing last time?

When it comes to social organization, the traditional East Asian point of view is therefore perfectly willing to risk some abuse of authority, even if it means that certain individuals suffer, if in doing so it can enhance the larger fabric of human life in general. It's the harmony of the whole that counts most, Confucians would say, not the private interests or preferences of the parts that compose it. For it's only when the whole social organism is functioning smoothly that individuals have the opportunity to realize the full potential of their lives.

The Five Constant Relationships may be compared to channels or canals in a sort of spiritual aqueduct, and what they carry—the force flowing along them that makes possible the

harmony of the whole system—is something Confucius referred to as *Te*. I'll be saying more about this very important Chinese concept in my next lecture when I talk about Taoism. For the time being, we may define it simply as “moral force”. We can picture this force not only as the flowing water of an aqueduct but as the circulation of blood in our bodies. Only when the blood is being pumped through your arteries to all your organs can you continue to live. According to the Confucian, *Te* supplies the equivalent in the body politic. Only when its life-giving energies are allowed to course freely throughout society can we become truly human. But in order for this to happen, rulers must be obeyed by their subjects, and among their subjects are husbands, who must exercise authority over their wives, and these wives in turn must be honored by their children, and among these children are older siblings who must be respected by the younger, and finally among the younger siblings there are going to be people who play the role of older friends, and who must be respected by their younger counterparts. This is the ideal social situation from the Confucian viewpoint.

But please take note of something very important. According to Confucius, in order for things to work properly a crucial principle must be observed by all parties: *only when the higher member in each relationship has submitted to what is higher than it does it in turn merit the submission of its partner*. Only then does it deserve to be respected and obeyed. This is no less true for the ruler than for anyone else. Even though the king or emperor stands highest in the social hierarchy, he himself must also submit, and his submission consists in obeying what Confucius simply called the “The Mandate of Heaven” (*T'ien Ming*, in Chinese), a concept not unlike that of the Hindu *Sanâtana Dharma* (see Lecture 3). If he doesn't submit—if he's not himself living a life of true *Li*—the entire scheme will be thrown out of whack, and when that happens, says Confucius, insurrection and revolution are not just permitted; they're required. I stress this point because people sometimes have the impression that the Confucian model is static and fails to guard against the possibility of tyranny and oppression. In fact, however, Confucius was very clear that legitimate authority must always be earned. “If the ruler himself is upright, all will go well even though he does not give orders. But if he himself is not upright, even though he gives orders, they will not be obeyed.” In fact in such a case the ruler *should* not be obeyed. And the same principle applies not only to rulers but to husbands, parents, elder siblings, and elder friends. All must act justly—that is, in accordance with *Li*—in order for the system to work.

Two other points should be noted concerning the Five Constant Relationships. Notice, first, the great respect they accord to seniority; three of the five pairs are based upon the authority conferred by old (or at least older) age. This too is very different from the usual view in our own western culture, which is probably the most youth-oriented civilization the world has ever known. The entire advertising industry—to mention just one of the most egregious examples—is geared to the notion that younger is better, and birthdays after forty tend to be occasions for sympathy and public mourning! This is in total contrast with the traditional Chinese perspective, where increasing age is linked with increasing respect and authority. I remember a friend describing for me a conversation he once had with what turned out to be an older Chinese woman. My friend, who was probably around fifty at the time, had hinted in a sort of off-handed way that this woman was younger than he, and of course he'd intended the remark as a compliment. She, however, was quite offended and shot back in no uncertain terms that she was *much* older than he! Old age was greatly valued by Confucius because of the wisdom experience brings, and you can see this in the stress he placed on the virtue of filial piety—that is, children's respect for their parents.

Yet another closely related and very important feature of the Confucian worldview, which can also be deduced from the Five Constant Relationships, is its emphasis on the importance of family. There's a lot of talk in our culture today about "family values" but nothing even remotely comparing to the degree to which the family is honored among traditional Chinese. I've already mentioned that the family name always comes first in Chinese, and the same characteristic emphasis can be seen in the fact that three of the five relationships are specific to families: husband and wife, parents and children, and older and younger siblings. I mentioned to you once before this semester that the things a civilization values most can often be discerned in its language, because the most important things are usually given the greatest number of words. In the case of Hinduism, it was the number of psychological terms in Sanskrit for different levels of consciousness (see Lecture 3). With Confucianism it's the number of words for family relations. Believe it or not, there are 115 separate Chinese words for all the different relatives in one's extended family. Where we have just the one English word "uncle", for example, the Chinese will use different terms depending on whether the person is the brother of your mother or father and depending on whether he's older or younger than your parent. That way, you see, one always knows precisely what the appropriate *Li* or comportment is going to be toward the person described.

I said above that when *Li* is properly practiced and the energies of *Te* are thereby flowing smoothly throughout the social organism individuals are given the opportunity to become “truly human”, and I want to conclude this lecture with a few brief words as to what I mean by this phrase. In Confucianism “true humanity” is signified by the Chinese word *Jen* (pronounced “ren”). Why should rulers be benevolent? Why should children respect their elders? And why do all the other constant relationships take the form they do? The answer Confucius gave in each case is that these are means for the attaining of *Jen*. *Jen*, you might say, is the sum that results when you add up the duties of the two members in any pair of relationships. It’s what you get (for example) when you put the husband’s duty to care for his wife with the wife’s duty to obey her husband, or again what you get when you join an elder sister’s obligation of gentleness to her younger brother’s obligation of respect.

Jen is sometimes translated as “goodness” or “human heartedness”; other possible equivalents include “compassion” and “empathy”. In my opinion the word “empathy” probably comes the closest of all. Empathy, as you know, is somewhat different from sympathy. When I sympathize with people, I feel sorry for them, but in a more or less detached sort of way: I know I wouldn’t want to be in their shoes, and I therefore pity them. But with empathy, I feel that I *am* in their shoes: I identify myself with them and feel as they feel from the inside out. This is the case also with *Jen*. Now of course our English words “sympathy” and “empathy” are usually used in connection with suffering or pain, and they have an almost exclusively negative connotation. *Jen* on the other hand can be either positive or negative. It’s a person’s capacity to identify fully with other people and to experience both their joys and their sorrows as if they were her own. Actually, that’s not quite right. I should say: *because* in fact they *are* her own. For as the Confucian sees it, to cultivate *Jen* is to realize that true humanity or true human being exists only in human relationships. As I said earlier, the self is a social construction, and *Jen* has to do with realizing this fact in one’s own concrete, personal experience and not simply as a philosophical theorem.

As you probably know, the Chinese language doesn’t have an alphabet like English or other western languages. Words are indicated instead by ideograms, which are stylized versions of pictures, rather like ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. The way you write *Jen* in Chinese is quite interesting; you make four strokes. (I’ll show you this in the slides with my YouTube lecture.) The first two signify a man, and the other two take the form simply of two horizontal lines, which is the Chinese way of writing the numeral 2. So you see: *Jen* is what comes to exist at the point of

intersection between two human beings; it's what comes of two hearts when they have begun to beat as one. This is precisely our supreme goal in life, says Confucius: to enter into this kind of intimate, organic bond—first with at least one other person, but finally with *all* beings. Our initial aim should be to break free from our egotism by finding *Jen* in our families. Indeed, that's the whole point of a family—to be a sort of Heavenly ordained training ground for compassion. But we mustn't stop short at this point. We must go on to break free from nepotism, which is unjustified preference for one's own family, and then from racism, which is unjustified preference for one's own ethnic group, and then from nationalism, which is unjustified preference for one's own country, and finally (and most profoundly) from humanism or anthropocentrism, which is unjustified preference for one's own species. The true master of *Jen* is the person who has learned to feel empathy not just for other people but for all creatures throughout the entire Universe—what Buddhists would call all “sentient beings” (see the discussion of “Right Livelihood” in Lecture 7).

In Chinese, this person is known as the *Chun-Tzu*, which means something like the “superior person” or the “exemplary man”. It's basically the Confucian word for a saint—for a person who has reached the final goal of the spiritual life and has thereby become a model for the rest of us. When it comes to describing this person, Confucianism is typically reserved, just as reserved as was Confucius in describing himself, never mentioning any miracles or supernatural phenomena. While the Hindu *jivan-mukta* is said to possess all sorts of extraordinary powers, including telepathy, levitation, bi-location, and other paranormal abilities, the *Chun-Tzu* is usually portrayed as far more down to earth. And yet in a way it's his very simplicity that's the most astounding and uncanny thing about him. For Confucianism, sanctity is a kind of disappearing act where a person becomes so completely transparent that the rest of us just forget he's there—until of course it's all over, and we're left standing around scratching our heads and saying (as I did of the Lone Ranger and the *Tathagata* in my last YouTube lecture), “Who *was* that masked man?!”