A GUIDE TO CHOOSING
YOUR PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

HOW TO LIVE A GOOD LIFE

EDITED BY MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI,
SKYE C. CLEARY, & DANIEL A. KAUFMAN

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Massimo Pigliucci, Skye C. Cleary,
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Introduction

Who needs a philosophy of life, anyway?

Do you have some idea, however vague, of how the world works? Do you have a sense of how to properly behave toward others? If you answered yes to both questions, congratulations, you have a philosophy of life! A philosophy of life is a framework that is made, at a minimum, of a metaphysics (i.e., an account of how the world works) and an ethics (i.e., a set of principles or guidelines to deploy when interacting with others). The real question, then, is not whether you have a philosophy of life, but rather if it stands up to scrutiny. That is, whether or not it's a *good* philosophy of life.

Most of us don't do what Socrates famously insists we should do: examine our life, since, as he put it, an unexamined life is not worth living. That's clearly an exaggeration. Plenty of unexamined lives turn out to be worth living, both by those who lived them and by the reckoning of those who examined them later on

(e.g., by way of writing someone else's biography). But Socrates was onto something, we think: examining your life, at least from time to time, may help you make small corrections to your life's course, if need be, and occasionally may even prompt you to make some radical changes to your unfolding path. That has happened to two of us, and we think the experience was transformative and positive.

As she details in chapter 12, Skye began her adult life as what she describes as a good "capitalist worker bee," enrolling in an MBA program over the objections of her then-boyfriend, who thought she had too little time for him already, and at any rate, they would soon get married, so what was the point? Then she took a philosophy class, and her professor gave her a book by the existentialist philosopher and landmark feminist Simone de Beauvoir. The effect was extraordinary. As she recalls: "It was as though I had just been flashed by the world outside of Plato's cave. Philosophy waltzed into my life, seduced me by dancing around and gracefully shattering all the assumptions and expectations I had about life."

Massimo, for his part, was absolutely positive he would live his life as a scientist, and for more than a couple decades that's just what he did, his personal philosophy being a very no-nonsense version of secular humanism (chapter 15). But at the peak of his career, a midlife crisis struck. Rather than buying himself a red Ferrari (which he couldn't afford, anyway), he went back to graduate school, got a PhD in philosophy, and shifted fields. Moreover, he began to explore alternatives to his rather uncritical early acceptance of secular humanism at around age fifteen, after he left the Catholic Church (chapter 9), and serendipitously (via his Twitter feed!) hit on the Greco-Roman philosophy of Stoicism (chapter 5). It was love at first click, and his life hasn't been the same since (for the better, if you need to ask).

Some of the other contributors to this volume have had similar experiences; some have not. But they all were very happy, when we asked them, to reflect publicly on their choice of philosophy of life, explaining what is distinct in that choice and why it works for them. By the end of the book, you will have been exposed to a dizzying array of philosophical views on life: from ancient Eastern approaches such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Daoism to Western ones such as Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism; from venerable religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to modern ones such as Ethical Culture, existentialism, effective altruism, pragmatism, and secular humanism. There could have been many more, of course: from geographic areas such as Africa and North and South America; from philosophical realms such as utilitarianism; from religious traditions such as Jainism, Sikhism, and Rastafarianism; or from more politically oriented movements such as feminism, anarchism, liberalism, conservatism, and Marxism. And maybe there will be, in the next edition. After all, this is a sampler, not an encyclopedia. The point is: there are many ways of living one's life philosophically, and it is worth reflecting on the differences as much as on the commonalities (see Conclusion).

You will have noticed that we don't make a sharp distinction between philosophies of life and religions, and we think this is for good reason. It is true that some of the traditions we mention are more obviously philosophical (Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, existentialism, effective altruism, pragmatism, secular humanism) and some more obviously religious (Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam). Then again, some have clear elements of both (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Stoicism, Ethical Culture). The demarcation line exists, we think, but it is fuzzy, and its application debatable in any given instance. It is also rather pointless. So long as a system of thought has the two components we

mentioned at the outset (a metaphysics and an ethics), it qualifies for this anthology. To the degree that the metaphysics includes a significant reference to a transcendental reality, and particularly to a god or gods, that tradition falls more on the side of religion than philosophy, but that distinction is not crucial.

This also means something that might surprise many readers: we all have a philosophy of life, because we were exposed to it when we were kids. More often than not that philosophy happens to be a religion, but of course secular humanists and existentialists also have children! Indeed, although we would love to see a systematic sociological study on this, it is likely comparatively rare that people consciously choose their philosophy of life, as Skye and Massimo have done, and even so, nobody ever really begins from scratch.

Why read the collection of essays you are holding in your hands? For at least three reasons. First, to appreciate the sheer variety of philosophical points of view on life and better understand other human beings who have chosen to live according to a philosophy different from your own. Understanding is the beginning of both wisdom and compassion. Second, because you may wish to know something more about your own—chosen or inherited—life philosophy; our authors are some of the best and brightest in the field, and their chapters make for enlightening reading. Last, it is possible that you, too, have been questioning your current take on life, the universe, and everything, and reading about other perspectives may reinforce your own beliefs, prompt you to experiment with another philosophy, or perhaps even cause you to arrive at a new eclectic mix of ideas.

The chapters of this book appear in rough chronological order of appearance of the different traditions in human history. The book is written to be read from cover to cover, but feel free to dip into the different traditions as they catch your attention. We

also want to note that while many of the chapters are written by academics, this is not an academic book, and it does not engage in detached armchair theorizing and objective critical analysis. These authors are actively involved with their chosen philosophies of life, they're thinking through what these philosophies mean in an everyday sense, and their writings provide a glimpse of how the world looks through their respective lenses. Thus, we see this book as an opening of possibilities.

Philosophy, as you probably know, literally means "love of wisdom." Even though the modern academic version of it tends to be highly specialized and remote from everyday life (like pretty much any other academic discipline), philosophizing has been a life-changing activity for many people across cultures for more than two and a half millennia. Do yourself a favor and enter into conversation with at least some of these thinkers, using the present collection as a gateway to a world of ideas that has surprising, very practical consequences for how we live our lives.

—Massimo Pigliucci, Skye C. Cleary,
and Daniel A. Kaufman

GROUP I

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.[1] 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.[2] 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

1 Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections,

2010–2050," Pew Research Center (April 2, 2015): 102, https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2015/03/PF_15.04.02_ProjectionsFullReport.pdf.

2 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 emo-

tions 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.

The concept of *samsara* poses a deeper problem in Indian philosophy than in the Abrahamic traditions, which conceive of life on Earth as a single cycle—ashes to ashes, dust to dust—with an afterlife (in heaven or hell) that occurs for each living thing only once. Indian philosophical traditions, including Buddhism and Jainism—with the exception of the materialist Charvaka philosophers—believe in reincarnation: an *eternal* cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death repeating across many lives.

Each of the competing philosophies offered ways to understand the repetitive cycle of *samsara* and offered differing prescriptions for liberation from it—an eventual release from the cycle of rebirths across multiple embodiments in animal and human forms, including possibly as devils and angels in inner and outer realms.

It is worth remarking, at this point, that there are around 500 million Buddhists in the world.[1] Half of those are in China, where they constitute a minority (a little more than 18 percent).

A large proportion of the rest are in several majority Buddhist countries, including Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Laos, Vietnam, Japan, and South Korea. India, where Buddhism began, is less than 2 percent Buddhist. North America has close to 4 million Buddhists—about 1.4 percent. Most of these are from East and South Asia (Japanese Pure Land Buddhism is the largest single denomination), although there are, especially in "spiritual but not religious" precincts, growing numbers of well-off white people who identify as Buddhist.

According to the dominant Brahminic tradition in India ca. fifth century BCE, to which Buddhism was a response, liberation from *samsara* comes by excellence at ritual performance that is only open to the priestly caste—the Brahmins. Liberation (*moksha*) involves release from both body and mind, at which point *atman*, a permanent, immutable diamond in the rough that is one's essence is absorbed (really, reabsorbed) into the bosom of the universe, its source: *Brahman*. Release (*moksha*) typically takes numerous reincarnations during which one reveals by high-caste membership that one is deserving of a further and final ascent to the order of fully enlightened beings.

Buddha took aim at the twin pillars of *Brahman* and *atman*. Buddha did not deny that there might be a transcendental source behind creation, such as *Brahman*. Rather, he insisted that the supernatural prop of *Brahman* is not something humans can know about one way or another (notice he did not treat rebirth with the same skepticism). It is an esoteric matter that has no bearing on the practical problems of living and mitigating suffering. As for the permanent *atman*, Siddhartha was what we might call a radical empiricist. Experience teaches that everything is impermanent, and thus so am I. I have no *atman*. Sure, I am a person, a psychophysically connected and continuous being who exists for

a time. I am conscious. Consciousness creates and keeps a story of who I am. But I don't have an *atman*.

The Buddhist concept of no-self (*annata*, *anatman*) is difficult and prone to misinterpretation. Note I just said that there are persons. I am one. And persons are conscious. I am; you are. We also have personalities and temperaments. We just don't have an immutable essence, *atman*.

We can avoid a certain amount of philosophical gymnastics and anachronistic attempts to assimilate what Buddhists mean by no-self to doctrines of Aristotle, Locke, Hume, William James, or Parfit by recognizing that Siddhartha's claim that each of us is *anatman*—not *atman*—is in the first instance a negative claim in a very specific historical context. It was a response to what he saw as the mysticism and puffery among the Brahmins who congratulated themselves by claiming that their essence (*atman*) was one and the same with the essence of the cosmos (*Brahman*). Both doctrines were esoteric and inconsistent with the Buddha's observation that everything is impermanent. Everything is in flux. There are no permanent essences, neither *Brahman* that stands behind the universe nor *atman* in you. The Buddha's last words were "Everything is impermanent. Strive on with awareness."

One could try to imagine what the Buddha would say about Abrahamic souls insofar as they are conceptualized as immortal. But it is important to realize that he was not directly talking to representatives of those faiths or to us modern, secular types. He was part of a different historical situation and a different conversation. In *How Buddhism Began*, Richard Gombrich writes:

> He was opposing the Upaniṣadic theory of the soul. In the Upaniṣads the soul, *ātman*, is opposed to both the body and the mind; for example, it cannot exercise

such mental functions as memory or volition. It is an essence, and by definition an essence does not change. Furthermore, the essence of the individual living being was claimed to be literally the same as the essence of the universe. . . .

Once we see what the Buddha was arguing against, we realise that it was something very few westerners have ever believed in and most have never even heard of.[2]

In any case, whereas Brahminic salvation (*moksha*) accrues from conscientious ritualistic performance, Buddhist salvation (*nirvana*) comes primarily from ethical excellence. If anything is rewarded, or is possibly its own reward, as we say, it is virtue not ritual. Ethical excellence is open to individuals of any social class. It does not depend on creedal religious beliefs of any sort. The universe somehow keeps track of the moral quality of one's actions (*karma*), and it rewards and punishes according to that moral quality. As Gombrich writes: "I do not see how one could exaggerate the importance of Buddha's ethicisation of the world, which I regard as a turning point in the history of civilisation."[3]

This "ethicisation of the world" suggests an interesting observation for how and why it is that Buddhism has, since the 1950s, become attractive to westerners. Among the Budd-curious, even among "practitioners" (more about them soon) in the West, most are attracted to Buddhism because they conceive it as congenial to secular sensibilities. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg were not religious, but they were very cool, and charmed by Buddhism. During the Vietnam War, Buddhist monks revealed themselves to be courageous self-immolating martyrs for peace, and hippies became interested in Buddhism as a source of their mantra "peace, love, and happiness." In the 1980s, Buddhist meditation


image
not
available

- Everything that happens is part of a great unfolding.
- Opportunities to leverage and improve the world or oneself in the unfolding are few and far between.
- We must be attentive, ever mindful, if we are to catch the opportunities for diminishing suffering in ourselves or in others.

The second strand of the threefold cord is ethics. For the original Buddha, ethics (*sila*) consists of these four conventional virtues:

- *right resolve*: aiming to accomplish what is good without lust, avarice, or ill will
- *right livelihood*: doing work that does not harm sentient beings, directly or indirectly
- *right speech*: truth-telling and no gossiping
- *right action*: no killing, no sexual misconduct, and no intoxicants

Plus these four exceptional virtues:

- *compassion*: the disposition to alleviate suffering for all sentient beings
- *loving-kindness*: the disposition to want to bring happiness to all sentient beings
- *sympathetic joy*: the disposition to feel joy rather than envy at the excellences and accomplishments of others
- *equanimity*: the disposition to experience the well-being of all other sentient beings as of equal importance as one's own is accompanied by serenity in accepting that one is not the universe's main event

The third and final strand that makes the cord extremely powerful is mindfulness or meditation. Early Buddhists culled and put into practice a few gems from the thousands of techniques of the mental and physical discipline of yoga that originated in India.

Meditation on breath, bodily posture, and the stream of consciousness assists in understanding impermanence and no-self experientiality, as well as honing attentional skill and self-regulation. My breaths, my aches and pains, my worries, desires, obsessions, and anxieties come and go. None of them define me. Nothing in experience stays the same. I see no abiding self. But I do see that I—perhaps we should say "i"—go on without any of these desires, anxieties, obsessions defining me. This might help break the grip of the idea that I am the most important thing in the universe, and in the case of weird or unhealthy identifications, it might help me see that I am not defined by those identifications.

Meditation is also used as a skillful means for developing oneself ethically, akin to the way athletes visualize exactly what they want to do in a race before it begins. Loving-kindness (*metta*) meditation involves imagining oneself in a situation, for example, where a hungry person needs food, which you have and want to keep. Ideally, one experiences—or works to experience—one's better self yielding and sharing the food. There are also techniques to work on specific skills, on becoming more patient, or controlling anger, or becoming more courageous or sympathetic. The aim is to become a person who is more sensitive to suffering in others and attuned to respond to diminish it.

One thought is that to actually be a Buddhist—for Buddhism to be your philosophy of life—you should have some grasp of all three strands of the threefold cord. This seems like a fairly plausible requirement, but it has one interesting implication.

When Americans learn that I am interested in Buddhism, they ask if I practice. They almost always mean do I meditate, and more specifically, do I meditate a lot. They are not asking if I believe in impermanence and no-self, or whether I try to practice an ethics of compassion and loving-kindness.

This idea that Buddhism has mostly to do with meditation is a distinctively Northern Atlantic peculiarity. In 2011, I wrote a *HuffPost* column about what I called "bourgeois Buddhists" in which I pointed out that your average Buddhist layperson in East and Southeast Asia meditates very little, about the same amount that your average American Christian prays. Most meditation in North America and Europe, which advertises itself as Buddhist or Buddhist-inspired, is served up as a tool for becoming less frazzled and more serene. It is about the self, not about being less selfish.

This brings me to the question of whether being a Buddhist will make you happy. There is hype to this effect. What about that? It seems too good to be true. Buddhism warns of appeals to ego, and one could hardly think of a better advertising appeal to the ego than the promise of happiness. Remember, the original Buddhism focused on *dukkha*, the problem of alleviating suffering for all sentient beings, including oneself. But alleviating suffering is not the same as making one happy. Here is a cautionary tale about the rush to conflate the two.

I wrote an article for *New Scientist* in May 2003 called "The Colour of Happiness" in which I reported on two preliminary studies of the "positive effect" of Buddhism in (as revealed in the brain of) exactly one meditating monk. To my chagrin, news agencies such as Reuters, the BBC, and Canadian and Australian public radio were quick to sum up the message of my essay with hyperbole of this sort: "Buddhists Lead Scientists to 'Seat of Happiness.'" Matthieu Ricard, the French-born meditating monk,

was declared to be the happiest person in the world. And I was one of the scientists who had discovered the happiness spot in his brain. (I wasn't even there!)

I did (too) many media interviews in a futile attempt to quell or at least rein in the premature enthusiasm for the idea that the brains of Buddhists were extremely frisky in the happiness department, and thus the owners of these brains were unusually happy people, perhaps the happiest of all, and that, in addition, meditation (whatever that is) was responsible for the very happy brains inside the very happy people. I was asked when I had discovered that Buddhists were the happiest people who ever lived and where exactly in the brain the happiness spot was. *Dharma Life* magazine, in an amusing headline of its own, called the scientists Richie Davidson and Paul Ekman, who performed the early studies on the meditating monk, "Joy Detectives."

I had joked for years about the way, for example, the *New York Times*'s Science News reported neuroscientific discoveries. Like most of my friends, I thought most of the hyperbolic hoopla foolish but harmless. But this Buddhism stuff was not funny. First, it was happening to me. Second, the situation felt Orwellian and thus vaguely dangerous. I sensed that many of the Buddhists I knew and respected were all too ready to buy into the hyperbole and sell their own Buddhist brand of snake oil, claiming for it certification by neuroscience as *the* way to happiness. Being allergic to magical, univocal spiritual solutions, I had to play skeptic. My Dutch Buddhist friend Rob Hogendoorn and I coined a word for what was going on: "Buddshit." Every spiritual tradition is prone to bullshit on its own behalf. "Buddshit" is simply distinctively Buddhist bullshit. The claim that Buddhism was the path to happiness was Buddshit.

It was puzzling, but not entirely surprising, that Buddhism would advertise itself as a way—the best way—to happiness. It

was not surprising, because, well, modern Western people will say they want happiness more than anything else. The Dalai Lama, the leader of the Geluk sect and the most famous Buddhist on Earth, succumbed to this advertising tactic with his co-authored book *The Art of Happiness* (1998). Happiness is the coin of the realm. Pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, after all.

But again, it was puzzling that the attraction of Buddhism had become the promise of happiness, because the original Buddhism did not promise happiness. The original Buddhism of 2,500 years ago offered practices that might mitigate suffering. And the original Buddha, no more than Confucius or Jesus, would not be someone we would call happy according to any modern conception. Siddhartha Gautama, as I have been saying, ethicized the universe. He did not personalize or hedonize or egoize the universe.

Still, there is something to this idea that Buddhism is a philosophy that might offer some of what modern Western people need or should want. What Buddhism offers is a metaphysical perspective, an ethics, and a set of practices that, taken together, deflate ego and might, if one is lucky, diminish a certain amount of magical thinking and produce a certain amount of serenity and equanimity.

Buddhism claims, first and foremost, to offer a solution, so far as one is possible, to the main existential problem faced by all humans: how to minimize suffering. It involves getting over one's self, deflating one's ego. Happiness, not being possible, is not much, or at least not the main thing, on offer in classical Buddhism—at least not until one has lived uncountable lives, at which point, if happiness is conceived as attaining *nirvana,* one becomes happy by becoming nothing, nothing at all, emptied of all desire.

If standard-brand happiness is not on offer from Buddhism,

CHAPTER TWO

Confucianism

Bryan W. Van Norden

Why do we like Einstein so much? Clearly we do. Think of all the dorm room posters and Internet memes with his likeness and quotations attributed to him (usually falsely). Einstein is also portrayed in countless films and television shows, and always favorably. Why does his very visage elicit an instinctive positive response from us?

The popularity of Einstein, believe it or not, is due to the influence of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (died fourth century BCE). Plato argued that the best life for a human is one of theoretical contemplation. People who study things like pure mathematics, theoretical physics, and philosophy have transcended attachment to the mundane affairs of the everyday world. They are better than the rest of us: more pure, almost godlike.

In the novel *Cat's Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut calls into question this ideal of the detached, superhuman scientist. The character Felix Hoenikker is intended as a caricature of the scientists who

developed nuclear weapons without giving much thought to the ethical implications of what they were doing. (Hoenikker is referred to as "the father of the atomic bomb," a title given in real life to physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, who led the Manhattan Project.) Hoenikker is portrayed as brilliant and intensely curious. However, he is also friendless, loveless, and utterly indifferent to other humans, including his own children. Hoenikker invents a substance, "*ice-nine*," which will allow any individual who possesses even a drop to end all life on Earth. He is blithely unconcerned about who will gain control of *ice-nine*, and what consequences will follow from it.

I want to stress that I have absolutely no reason to believe that either Einstein or Oppenheimer was actually like Hoenikker. But certainly some great scientists are. Wernher von Braun was equally happy building rockets for the Nazis during World War II and building them for NASA during the Cold War. (As the comedian Tom Lehrer once quipped in a parody of von Braun: "'Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down? / That's not my department!' says Wernher von Braun.") I am hardly on an anti-science crusade. After all, philosophy gave birth to natural science, and we wish our progeny all the best! My only hope is that you will question the Platonic assumption that a life is admirable or worth living merely because it involves the exercise of purely theoretical reason.

But then what *does* make life worth living? Followers of Confucius (551–479 BCE) answer that a good life is one characterized by loving relationships with other humans. The paradigm of loving relationships is provided by the ideal family, in which parents guide and nurture children, and siblings care for one another. Analogously, political leaders and supervisors of every kind should work for the well-being of their subordinates, and we should have compassion for our friends, members of our com-

munities, and all other people—just as we would for our own siblings. As one Confucian put it:

> The people are my siblings, and all living things are my companions. . . . All under Heaven who are tired, disabled, exhausted, sick, brotherless, childless, widows or widowers—all are my siblings who are helpless and have no one else to appeal to. To care for them at such times is the practice of a good son.[1]

This leads to a view of humans as largely defined by our relationships. Who am I, for example? I am Bryan Van Norden, but to say this is to identify myself as standing in a *relationship* with all other Van Nordens, including my parents and siblings, but also the Van Nordens who served in both the Union and the Confederate Armies in the Civil War, and those who fought on both the Revolutionary and Loyalist sides during the Revolutionary War. (I imagine that family reunions among my ancestors were somewhat awkward.) I am a professor, but this too is a relational property: I am a professor *of* a particular college and a teacher *of* particular students. I am an author, but this is a complex relational property involving me, the presses that publish my books and articles, my editors, and my readers. Even my most scientifically objective properties are relational: I am a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, but a species exists only because the members of the species exist. Had it not been for the survival of the first humans in Africa, I would not exist. Finally, insofar as I am a mere clump of matter, I am related to everything else *indirectly* through the Big Bang and *directly* through the force of gravity (which drops off with the square of distance but never disappears).

The fact that our qualities are relational has ethical implica-

tions. Since there is no "me" that is completely independent of my relationships, I live well to the extent that I do a good job at my relationships. Insofar as my identity is defined by being a teacher, I am living well when teaching well, and living badly when teaching badly. But isn't there more to life than one's job? Certainly! But insofar as my identity is defined by being a father, to be a good father is to be a good me, and to be a bad father is to be a bad me. As these examples illustrate, there is no fundamental tension between self-interest and concern for others, because a major component of living well is fulfilling the relationships that partially define us. Confucius expressed this very succinctly. When asked for insight into what a flourishing society would be like, he replied, "Let the ruler be a true ruler, the officials true officials, the fathers true fathers, and the sons true sons."[2]

One Confucian philosopher, Wang Yangming (1472–1529), argued that people are implicitly aware of the fact that they form "one body" with other things:

> This is why, when they see a child [about to] fall into a well, they cannot avoid having a feeling of alarm and compassion for the child. This is because their benevolence forms one body with the child. Someone might object that this response is because the child belongs to the same species. But when they hear the anguished cries or see the frightened appearance of birds or beasts, they cannot avoid a sense of being unable to bear it. This is because their benevolence forms one body with birds and beasts. Someone might object that this is because birds and beasts are sentient creatures. But when they see grass or trees uprooted and torn apart, they cannot avoid feeling a sense of sympathy and distress.[3]

Wang goes on to argue that we even "form one body with tiles and stones" because we feel regret at seeing beautiful old buildings or scenic cliffs "broken and destroyed."[4]

This Confucian view is in sharp contrast with what has been the dominant view in Western philosophy for more than two millennia: that humans are metaphysically distinct and politically independent. Philosophers who agree about little else—from essentialists like Aristotle (384–322 BCE) to existentialists like Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986)—have taken it for granted that reality must somehow consist of independent individuals.[5] This fiction has had some positive consequences. The belief that humans are born as free individuals who innately owe nothing to one another led to social contract theory: the view that political power is justified by independent individuals reaching an agreement that respects the rights and interests of each. This helped provide a rationalization for respecting freedom of speech and religion.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) gave pithy expression to the political myth of radical individualism by saying, "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains."[6] But we are not born free. We are born with obligations to the parents and other relatives who will raise us to adulthood, to teachers who shape us far beyond what is required to just earn a paycheck, and to the preexisting civilization that makes all our individual contributions possible. Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) has become a literary paradigm of the independent individual who owns everything in his world because he creates everything himself. This is ironic, since those who have actually read the novel know that it is about the dependence of the individual upon the grace of God, and upon the accomplishments of earlier humans (as symbolized by the tools and resources that Crusoe recovers from his wrecked ship and requires for his survival).