



## Themes of the Confucian Analects<sup>1</sup>

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### THE PRACTICAL PURSUIT OF THE WAY

<b>dao</b>	“dow”	the Way
<b>xue</b>	“shweh”	learning
<b>xi</b>	“shee”	practice
<b>ren</b>	“ree-yen”	goodness
<b>de</b>	“duh”	virtue
<b>he</b>	“huh”	harmonious ease

The Master said,

“To learn and then to have occasion to practice what you have learned, is this not satisfying? (1.1.1)

*To pursue the Way is to learn how to become a complete person, a balanced person, one who—eventually, ideally—is capable of living well and rightly in society with a sort of effortless, harmonious ease.*

“People today think of ‘learning’ as the [mere] pursuit of knowledge, whereas the ancients thought of ‘learning’ as cultivating the self.” (Cheng Shude, p. 1)

The Master said,

“I once engaged in thought for an entire day

<sup>1</sup> All citations are from Edward Slingerland, *Confucius: Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (2003 Hackett Publishing Co.). This is the most lucid and comprehensive translation that I have encountered.

without eating and an entire night without sleeping, but it did no good. It would have been better for me to have spent that time in learning.” (15.31)

*If one wishes to become a skilled musician, she must learn something of music theory so that she understands the conventions of her art. (What is the difference between a major and minor key? What is the role of tempo? Why is Bach considered a master?)*

“When it comes to learning, nothing is more crucial than actual exertion and practice. What one says is not worthy paying attention to.” (Wang Fuzhi, p. 43; see 5.10)

*However, while theory has its important place, it is ultimately practice—persistent, imperfect practice—that is necessary for developing one’s musical skill. A true musician never ceases in practice, even when she has surpassed the novice levels and achieved an expertise that sets her apart from others, musicians and non-musicians alike.*

*So it is with learning the Confucian Way.*

<b>yanjiao</b>	“yehn-jyow”	theoretical teaching
<b>shenjiao</b>	“shun-jyow”	teaching by example

The Master said,

“Do you disciples imagine that I am being secretive? I hide nothing from you. I take no action, I make no move, without sharing it with you. This is the kind of person that I am.” (7.24)

“When it comes to teaching disciples, there are two approaches: theoretical teaching... and teaching by example.... Theoretical teaching is certainly useful for teaching one how to act, but it cannot match the sort of profound effect that one can achieve through teaching by example.” (Wang Yangming, p. 72)

### Refining One’s Native Substance

<b>zhi</b>	“jeer”	native substance
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<b>wen</b>	“wun”	cultural refinement
<b>li</b>	“lee”	ritual propriety
<b>junzi</b>	“joon-dz”	gentleman
<b>xiao</b>	“show”	filial piety

*One’s native substance is her basic character; it is a combination of innate and early, learned dispositions and qualities. This adolescent character must be refined through culturally informed practice in order to produce the mature, balanced character of the “gentleman,” or good person.*

Master You said...

“The gentleman applies himself to the roots. ‘Once the roots are firmly established, the Way will grow.’ Might we not say that filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness?” (1.2)

*To apply oneself to the “roots” is to cultivate one’s native substance, to develop her character through practice, both formalized ritual and the informal activities of one’s daily life.*

*For example, sacrificing to the spirits of one’s ancestors is a ritualized form of filial piety. Showing—and genuinely feeling—respect for past and living patriarchs is a way of honoring traditional values. One also practices such virtuous behavior in the private, day-to-day interactions with one’s living family—through willing obedience to one’s parents, elder brothers, “uncles,” et al.*

*Elsewhere in the Analects, this plant metaphor of the self is extended to include “branches.” In some contexts, these are taken to be the cultural refinements that serve as the second tier of cultivation, such as learning proper forms of music.*

*In other contexts, the branches represent an individual’s public life (as the roots are buried, or private, while the rest of the plant is visible to the world). Hence, if one cultivates virtuous behavior in one’s private life, then this should inform virtuous public behavior, as well.*

## Harmonizing Native Substance and Refinement

The Master said,

“When native substance overwhelms cultural refinement, the result is a crude rustic. When cultural refinement overwhelms native substance, the result is a foppish pendant. Only when culture and native substances are perfectly mixed and balanced do you have a gentleman.” (6.18)

“When it comes to ritual it is harmony that is valued..., but if one is to err, it should be on the side of the “roots”—that is, the emotions that ideally inform and motivate the ritual forms.” (Slingerland, 18; see 3.4)

*Since character and practice mutually condition each other, harmony is the ideal sought in and between both.*

Master You said,

“When it comes to the practice of ritual, it is harmonious ease (he) that is to be valued. It is precisely such harmony that makes the Way of the Former Kings so beautiful. If you merely stick rigidly to ritual in all matters, great and small, there will remain that which you cannot accomplish. Yet if you know enough to value harmonious ease but try to attain it without being regulated by the rites, this will not work either.” (1.12)

The Master said,

“If you cannot manage to find a person of perfectly balanced conduct to associate with, I suppose you must settle for the wild or the fastidious. In their pursuit of the Way, the wild plunge right in, while the fastidious are always careful not to get their hands dirty.” (13.21)

*While the “wild” are unrefined, the fastidious lack the sincere passion for learning the Way, the flexibility necessary to be successful in it, and the courage to maintain the constant effort needed to realize it.*

*At several points, Confucius indicates that if he had to choose, he would prefer (so to speak) a diamond in the rough to a highly polished piece of glass. Polishing, though it may take some time, will eventually reveal a gem of beauty if the stuff one is working is truly gemstone, but nothing can be done to make cubic zirconium anything other than what it is.*

The Master said,

“The application of colors comes only after a suitable unadorned background is present.” (3.8.2)

“Just as all of the cosmetics in the world are of no avail if the basic lines of the face are not pleasing, so is the refinement provided by ritual forms of no help to one lacking in native substance.” (Slingerland, 20)

*It is suggested that his emphasis on having the right basic character is a reflection of Confucius’ frustration with the corruption he perceived as pervasive during his lifetime.*

### Can Anyone Pursue the Way?

*In several passages, Confucius seems to say “yes”—*

The Master said...

“In education, there are no differences in kind.” (15.39)

“By nature people are similar; they diverge as the result of practice.” (17.2)

“The general tenor of the *Analects*... seems to be summed up fairly well here in 17.2: all people, even non-Chinese barbarians, are born with more or less similar basic stuff, and it is the quality of the tradition into which they are socialized—the consequences of ‘practice’ (*xi*)—that really makes the difference.” (Slingerland, p. 200)

*At the same time, there are also passages which seem resigned to real differences in capacity—not*

*just practice—between the “common people” and those who should lead them.*

The Master said,

“The common people can be made to follow it, but they cannot be made to understand it.” (8.9)

“The most simple interpretation is that the common people can be guided along the Confucian Way—most efficaciously through the influence of a gentleman’s Virtue—but lack the cognitive ability to grasp the principles of the Way....” (Slingerland, p. 81)

*However, other passages in which Confucius makes clear that judging another’s capabilities (a) takes practice on the part of the one judging and (b) should not be based upon superficial facts about the other person—much less mere opinion held by others—leave ample room for interpreting the discrepancy between the common person and the uncommon person not a matter merely of the circumstances into which one is born and initially raised, but is critically determined by what one makes of herself within those circumstances, and what she is further willing to do to improve herself.*

The Master said...

“If the offspring of a plow-ox has a solid red coat and nicely formed horns, even if people may think it unsuitable for sacrifice, would the spirits of the mounts and rivers reject it?” (6.6)

“When the multitude hates a person, you must examine them and judge for yourself. The same holds true for someone whom the multitude love.” (15.28)

*A passion for learning as intrinsically valuable, the will to make the effort required to become a better person, and the strength of character to keep following the arduous path of the Way are what separate the common person—the petty or “small”*

person—from the uncommon person, the virtuous person.

Confucius said,

“Those who are born understanding it are the best; those who come to understand it through learning are second. Those who find it difficult to understand and yet persist in their studies come next. People who find it difficult to understand but do not even try to learn are the worst of all.” (16.9)

‘All three of the first categories, although different in terms of native substance, are the same in eventually gaining knowledge. This is why the gentleman values learning, and nothing else. It is only someone who does not learn because he finds it difficult who is ultimately dismissed as inferior.’ (Yang Shi, p. 196)

Furthermore, Confucius more often appears to take differences in individual capacity for learning as a challenge for teachers as much as a challenge for students, as evidenced in his idea of the “application of skillful means,” or adjusting one’s pedagogy to fit the capabilities and needs of one’s individual students.

“Altering one’s teachings to fit the level of understanding of one’s audience is [the] means by which one allows them to ask and think about issues that are relevant to them, and is also the way one leads them gradually into higher levels of understanding.” (Zhang Shi, p. 59; see 6.21)

The story of Zilu and Ran Qiu (see 11.22), disciples of Confucius who tended to be either too impetuous or too cautious, respectively (see 5.7 and 6.12), is often cited as illustrative of this point. In a given instance, the student who is too apt to act without thinking is advised to refrain from action, while the student who is too apt to think without acting is advised, essentially, to refrain from any more thinking and finally act.

“Each piece of advice was aimed at correcting the fault particular to teach person.” (Zheng Xuan, p. 120)

Ran Qiu said,

“It is not that I do not delight in your Way, Master, it is simply that my strength is insufficient.”  
The Master said,  
“Someone whose strength is genuinely insufficient collapses somewhere along the Way. As you for, you deliberately draw the line.” (6.12)

*So can anyone pursue the Way? In the final analysis, the Confucian answer seems to be “Yes, all things being equal... although, given that all things are not equal, individuals cannot pursue it in the same manner, or achieve the same level of success in their pursuit.”*



## ESSENCE OF THE WAY

The Master said,

“Find inspiration in the Odes, take your place through ritual, and achieve perfection in music.” (8.8)

(1) “Find inspiration in the Odes,…”

*Jian Xi takes the noun of the first phrase (xing) to mean “inspiration” or “stimulation,” so that “Gazing upon the intentions of the ancients can give inspiration to one’s own intention.” Bao Xian takes it to mean “beginning,” so that “The point is that the*

cultivation of the self should start with study of the Odes.” *Slingerland encapsulates this first step as “cognitive shaping through learning.”*

*We can understand this as the theoretical aspect of learning involved in pursuing the Way.*

(2) “...take your place through ritual,…”

*To “take one’s place” refers to “taking up one’s role as an adult among other adults in society, which requires mastery of rituals governing social interactions.”*

The Master said, “To sacrifice to spirits that are not one’s own is to be presumptuous. To see what is right, but to fail to do it, is to be lacking in courage.” (2.24)

“The former refers to doing that which one is not supposed to do, and the latter to not doing what one is supposed to do.” (Huang Gan, p. 16)

*Hence the second step is “behavioral shaping through ritual training,” or learning privately how one ought to act, so that one is eventually prepared to act correctly in the public sphere.*

*We may understand this as the practical aspect of learning.*

...“Overshooting the mark is just as bad as falling short of it.” (11.16)

*An important component of mastering this second step— learning how to comport oneself using the mean of ritual as a guide— marks a return to the theme of finding the appropriate harmonizing balance between extremes.*

“...[One disciple] overshoot the mark because his nature was overfull and disorderly, and so in his actions he was prone to go too far and not restrain himself. [Another disciple] fell short because his

nature was somewhat cold and detached, and so in his actions he was prone to stop himself before he had reached the mark.”

(3) “...and achieve perfection in music.”

“Finally, the joy inspired by the powerfully moving music of the ancients brings the cognitive and behavioral together into the unselfconscious, effortless perfection that is *wu-wei*.”

**wu-wei** “oo-way” doing by not doing

*Slingerland makes reference to a dance metaphor found in the Mencius which expresses the intention of (3)—*

“...the substance of music is the joy one takes in benevolence and rightness. Once such joy is born, it cannot be stopped. Once it cannot be stopped, then one begins unconsciously to dance it with one’s feet and wave one’s arms in time with it.” (*Mencius* 4:A:27)

(All citations above pp. 80-81, except 11.16. with Huang Kan’s commentary, p. 117 and 2.24 with Huan Gan’s commentary, p. 16.)

The Master said,

“One who knows it is not the equal of one who loves it, and one who lives it is not the equal of one who takes joy in it.” (6.20)

*These steps in attaining the Way are also found in the passage of the Analects referred to as “Confucius’ spiritual autobiography,” albeit it is not clear that Confucius felt he had ever attained the final stage—*

The Master said,

“At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning;  
at thirty, I took my place in society;  
at forty, I became free from doubts;  
at fifty, I understood Heaven’s Mandate;

at sixty, my ear was attuned;  
and at seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety.” (2.4)

### Goodness as a Harmony of Virtues

The Master said,

“Just because someone is able to learn with you does not necessarily mean that they can travel the Way in your company; just because they can travel the Way in your company does not necessarily mean that they can take their place [in society] alongside you; just because they can take their place alongside you does not necessarily mean that they can join you in employing discretion.” (9.30)

*The so-called “lesser virtues” can become vices if they are not employed sensitively, in response to the needs of a particular situation. This “obscuration” of virtue is the result of rigidly and unimaginatively observing rules.*

*Achieving the necessary situational balance requires that one cultivate both her knowledge of rules and her ability to employ them in an appropriately flexible fashion. This is what is meant by “employing discretion.” To achieve this is to succeed in manifesting the virtue of Goodness.*

*The Six Obscurations (17.8.2ff)—*

“Loving Goodness without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of foolishness.

Loving wisdom without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of deviance.

Loving trustworthiness without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of harmful rigidity.

Loving uprightness without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of intolerance.

Loving courage without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of unruliness.

Loving resoluteness without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of willfulness.”



### The Single Thread

<b>zhong</b>	“jōng”	1. dutifulness
<b>shu</b>	“shoo”	2. mean/middle empathic understanding

The Master said, “Master Zeng! All that I teach can be strung together on a single thread.”

“Yes, sir.” Master Zeng responded.

After the Master left, the disciples asked, “What did he mean by that?”

Master Zeng said, “All that the Master teaches amounts to nothing more than dutifulness (*zhong*) tempered by understanding (*shu*).” (4.15)

*We again encounter the notion that one must understand rules, duty, and ritual and sincerely seek to adhere to them (or enforce them, if that is one’s position), but that one must also develop the ability to do so such that she acts in a manner appropriate to the situation.*

Someone asked,

“What do you think of the saying, ‘Requite injury with kindness (*de*)’?”

The Master replied,

“With what, then, would one requite kindness? Requite injury with uprightness, and kindness with kindness.” (14.34)

### Knowing others

Fan Chi asked about Goodness.

The Master replied, “Care for others.”

He then asked about wisdom.

The Master replied, “Know others.” (12.22.1-4)

*One’s ability to observe a harmonious mean is cultivated by becoming an astute observer of human behavior, both one’s own and that of others.*

Zigong asked,

“Is there one word that can serve as a guide for one’s entire life?”

The Master answered,

“Is it not ‘understanding’ (shu)? Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.” (15.24)

Zhongong asked about Goodness.

The Master said...

“Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.” (12.2.3)

*This is, of course, the negative expression of the “Golden Rule.”*

The Master said,

“Do not be concerned about whether or not others know you; be concerned about whether or not you know others.” (1.16)

*When rigid and unimaginative disciple Zigong declares that “not imposing upon others what I do not myself desire” is his goal, Confucius is amused and remarks, “That is something quite beyond you” (5.12).*

*One needs to be flexible and compassionate to realize this goal of behaving rightly towards others.*

“The fact that petty people are not able to act like gentlemen is not their fault, and so one should be understanding and not blame them. If you observe their mistakes, you can put both the worthies and the fools in their proper places, and this is what it means to be Good.” (Kong Anguo, p. 32; see 4.7)

### Self-Correction

*Becoming an astute observer of human behavior not only helps one become better at making good decisions, but gives one an opportunity for self-correction, an essential element of flexibility and humility necessary for growing in virtue.*

The Master said,

“When you see someone who is worthy, concentrate upon becoming their equal; when you see someone who is unworthy, use this as an opportunity to look within yourself.” (4.17)

“The ‘seeing’ mentioned in this passage refers to that which any person can easily perceive—the difficulty lies entirely in actually beginning to do something about it.” (Jiao Yuanxi, p. 35)

The Master said...

“A person who finds respectful words pleasing but does not live up to them, or agrees with others’ reproaches and yet does not change—there is nothing I can do with one such as this.” (9.24.3)

“To make a mistake and yet to not change your ways—that is what is called truly making a mistake.” (15.30)

“He never misdirected his anger and he never made the same mistake twice.” (6.3.2)

“Only the very wise and the very stupid do not change.” (17.3)

*One may reference 16.9 in connection with 17.3, understanding “the very wise” to be those rare few who are “born knowing it.” Confucius did not*

*consider himself to be one of those persons, although he suspected that his beloved disciple Yan Hui was.*



### RELATIONSHIPS

... Yan Hui replied,

“As long as you are still here, Master, how could I dare to allow myself to die?” (11.23)

*The four great relationships—through which one learns how to behave towards people generally—are that of husband and wife, child and parent, minister and lord, and friend and friend (see 1.7).*

### Friendships

The Master said...

“[D]o not accept as a friend one who is not your equal.” (1.8.2)

*Given Confucius’ previously established lack of class snobbery and admonition that one learn to correctly judge others, it is not a stretch to understand that “friend” here is intended in the same sense that Aristotle speaks of it in the Nicomachean Ethics—*

“...[W]hat Confucius means by ‘friend’ (you) here is a person who shares one’s moral aspirations (cf. 9.30, 16.4, 16.5). One is to compare oneself with other people in general, in order to evaluate one’s moral progress (4.17, 7.22, 16.11), but the fellowship provided by a friend in virtue combines a powerful

spur to further moral development with a deeply felt solidarity of purpose—an importance solace during the long and arduous process of self-cultivation.” (Slingerland, p. 4)

Thus—

Master Zeng said,

“The gentleman acquires friends by means of cultural refinement. And then relies upon his friends for support in becoming Good.” (12.24)

The Master said,

“To live in the neighborhood of the Good is fine. If one does not choose to dwell among those who are Good, how will one obtain wisdom?” (4.1)

While at the same time—

The Master said,

“With regard to the world, the gentleman has no predispositions for or against any person. He merely associates with those he considers right.” (4.10)

*There is no contradiction in these passages, as one who learns to accurately judge others learns to discriminate between those who would be able companions on the path to virtue, and those who would not.*

*Furthermore, as friendship does not exhaust the possibilities for relationship, it should not be understood that one would have no association at all with persons who were not one’s equal in virtue. How would one learn from the good and bad examples set by others, otherwise? Even more practically, how would one successfully interact with family and co-workers, otherwise?*

*Confucius never advocates becoming some kind of hermit or cloistered monk; rather, one very strong over-arching theme in all of the Analects is the fact that human beings are essentially social, and virtuous behavior is a matter of living harmoniously and well with others.*

### Leading by Virtuous Example

*There are several references in the Analects to the attractive power of virtue—*

The Master said, “Virtue is never solitary; it always has neighbors.” (4.25)

*One of the most important ways in which this attraction can be fostered and applied to good ends, from the Confucian point of view, is through virtuous leadership (whether formal, as in a government post, or informal, as in a familial role).*

The Master said,

“One who rules through the power of Virtue is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars.” (2.1)

*Many of the passages in the Analects addressing leadership do so regarding its official form, often under the rubric of Confucius giving solicited advice to rulers.*

“If wealth is fairly distributed, there should be no poverty; if your state or house is in harmony, there should be no scarcity; and if your people are content, there should be no instability.

This being the case, if those who are distant will not submit, simply refine your culture and Virtue in order to attract them. Once you have attracted them, you should make them content.” (16.1.10-11)

The Master said,

“Oversee them with dignity, and the people will be respectful; oversee them with filiality and kindness, and the people will be dutiful; oversee them by raising up the accomplished and instructing those who are unable, and the people will be industrious.” (2.20.2ff)

*A recurring theme in this advice is that setting the behavioral example for those for whom one is responsible is the most effective way of securing*

*their loyalty and influencing their behavior in positive ways.*

*This harkens back to passages underscoring the importance of teaching by example and not merely providing lip-service to virtue.*

Zilu asked about governing.

The Master replied, “Precede the common people in accepting the burden of labor.”

When asked to elaborate, he added, “Do not slacken your efforts.” (13.1)

### Rule by Wu-Wei

*Although the term “wu-wei” only actually appears at one point in the text (below), it is taken to be a concept permeating the Confucian idea of virtuous leadership.*

The Master said,

“Is Shun not an example of someone who ruled by means of wu-wei? What did he do? He made himself reverent and took his proper [ritual] position facing south, that is all.” (15.5)

*Slingerland’s lucid commentary again becomes quite helpful here, as he explains three lines of interpretation regarding this passage—*

#### *(1) Institutional Wu-Wei*

*He Yan takes “wu-wei” in the literal sense of “doing nothing,” so that if a ruler can populate government positions with capable people (see book 14 re: employing the right people) and set in motion an efficient machinery of government, then the state will more or less run itself.*

#### *(2) Wu-Wei of the Individual Leader*

*Slingerland finds Wang Fuzhi’s interpretation more in keeping with the greater part of the text (and reflects the passages selected in the previous section of this discussion). A virtuous ruler effortlessly,*

*unconsciously transforms those around her through her own virtuous example. By concentrating on her self-cultivation and allowing external matters to arise happen non-coercively, she rules without conscious, forceful effort upon others. (See 1.12, 2.19-21, 12.17-12.19, 13.6).*

### (3) Institutional and Individual Wu-Wei

*Zhu Xi offers a unified theory of (1) and (2), so that “ruling by means of wu-wei refers to the sage accumulating Virtue and thereby transforming the common people, so that there is no need to wait for him to actually do anything in particular... Moreover, in this way he also attracts the right people to fill the various offices, which makes it even less likely that one will see traces of the ruler’s actions.” (Slingerland, pp. 175-6)*

## FINAL THOUGHTS

### Sincerity

The Master said,  
“If I am not fully present at the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice at all.” (3.12.2)

*Being genuine and sincere in both one’s formal practice and daily living is of great importance to pursuing the Way.*

The Master said,  
“Merely set your heart sincerely upon Goodness and you will be free of bad intentions.” (4.4)

### The Greater Person and the Lesser Person

*The dichotomy between the character of the more or less virtuous individual is drawn repeatedly throughout the text, both as a way of discussing individual “lesser virtues” and as a way of demonstrating the danger of extremes, imbalance and disharmony in one’s personality, dispositions and actions—*

The Master said...

“The gentleman understands rightness, whereas the petty person understands profit.” (4.16)

“A gentleman helps others to realize their good qualities, rather than their bad. A petty person does the opposite.” (12.16)

“The gentleman harmonizes (he), and does not merely agree (tong). The petty person agrees, but he does not harmonize. (13.23)

“The gentleman is easy to serve, but hard to please.... The petty person is hard to serve, but easy to please....” (13.25)

“Of course the gentleman encounters hardship. The difference is that the petty man, encountering hardship, is overwhelmed by it.” (15.2.2)

“The gentleman is distressed by his own inability, rather than the failure of others to recognize him.” (15.19)

### The Perfect Person

*Although the term “complete person” or “perfect person” occurs once or twice in the text, actually attaining this ideal is not the point of pursuing the Way— rather, it is the constant act of striving to better realize this ideal that matters.*

### One Last Enigmatic Passage

The Master said, “Human beings can broaden the Way—it is not the Way that broadens human beings.” (15.29)

“The Way is silent and without action, and requires human beings in order to be put into practice. Human beings are able to harmonize the Way... The Way does not harmonize with humans...” (Cai Mo, p. 185)