

## Lessons from the Masters Siddhartha, K'Ung Ch'iu and the Old Man

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One version of an old story has it that when Prince Siddhartha Gautama was born, a local priest visited the family compound and prophesied that the young man would grow up to be either an emperor or a Buddha, an Enlightened One. Quite naturally, the child's worldly father preferred the former to the latter, so he sequestered young Siddhartha within the walls of the palace, hoping to discourage any untoward spiritual development by supplying everything the young man desired in the way of material delights. But young men are curious, so one day Siddhartha had his chariot driver take him out into the real world. The journey changed his life.



The birth of Gautama Buddha, in a forest at Lumbini. (CC BY-SA 3.0)

### Siddhartha's Journey

Soon after departing the palace grounds the young prince encountered an old man. He had seen elders before, but this was an aged man who had not benefitted from the cosmetics money could obtain. Siddhartha began to suspect that life exacts a toll, and he wondered about the path his own life would take. Fear began to cloud his still-inexperienced mind. He soon encountered a man who was afflicted by a hideous disease. With a shock, he thus discovered that life contains an element of suffering. Then he caught his first glimpse of a corpse, and the reality of death was seared into his consciousness. Siddhartha later reflected on the lessons he had learned: *"I also am subject to death and decay and am not free from the power of old age, sickness, and death. Is it right that I should feel horror, repulsion, and disgust when I see another in such plight? And when I reflected thus ... all the joy of life which there is in life died within me."*

His heretofore-held illusions had evaporated. He now knew he needed to place his trust in something besides wealth and family position. Pleasure could not prevent age, illness, or death, and so could not be the pathway to happiness. While contemplating this, still unaware that he was about to completely change course in life, he was perplexed to come upon a holy man who seemed quite content. Something within Siddhartha suddenly shifted. He took a leap of faith. His mind at once understood what his heart had already come to appreciate.





The four heavenly messengers which the Bodhisatta Siddhartha Gautama encounters on his trips outside the palace: an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a wandering monk.  
(Public Domain)

From that moment on, the dancing girls back home did not please him anymore. He decided he had to study the meaning of life by becoming a holy man. His father, in trying to keep him from seeking a spiritual path, had instead catapulted the young man towards a destiny that would change the world. Siddhartha was

determined to go on a journey of exploration even though he did not know where that journey would lead. If one had asked him what he was searching for and how he even knew there was something worth finding, he probably could not have answered. But he knew he had to look for it.

There was still the matter of convincing his father who, as expected, refused to let the boy leave. In lieu of what would later occur, it is instructive to observe the young man's method for obtaining what he wanted. Siddhartha simply waited, insisting he would not move until he had his father's consent. Dinnertime came and went. Siddhartha stood patiently in place. It grew dark outside, time for the household to go to bed. His father, certain that by morning the boy would return to his senses, said goodnight and retired to his sleeping chamber. But morning's light found the boy still standing in the living room, ready to have his way or die. Needless to say, the young prince eventually got his way. Saying goodbye to his family, Siddhartha and his faithful charioteer left the family compound, never to return. He began to search for a reality he could trust.



Departure of Prince Siddhartha by Abanindranath Tagore (1914) (Public Domain)

## Siddhartha Becomes Buddha

For six years he wandered and studied. He talked with Brahmins, the Hindu holy men. He learned yoga disciplines and meditation. He practiced extreme asceticism, eventually trimming his diet down to one grain of rice a day and then deciding that since he could exist on one grain, why not try slicing it in half to make it last twice as long? Eventually he became so thin and emaciated that it was later said a person could grasp Siddhartha's backbone from the front.

The Emaciated Siddhartha meditating.  
(Sacca/ CC BY-SA 3.0)

Even after all this, enlightenment eluded him. He joined a group of traveling holy men, none of whom were making any more progress along the spiritual path than he was. They had nothing new to teach him. Terribly discouraged, he resorted to the technique that he had successfully used with his father. Seating himself beneath a fig tree known as a Bo tree (sometimes called a *Bodhi* tree, or "Tree of Knowledge"), he vowed he would meditate right there, not moving until he either reached enlightenment or died.

There in the wilderness of his own confusion he met Mara, the devil, who tempted Siddhartha with the traditional three temptations. First, the temptation of the flesh. Three beautiful women walked by, begging him to follow. (Legend does not explain why three beautiful women were interested in an emaciated man whose backbone could be grasped from the front!) Second came the temptation of the spirit. Ferocious demons attempted to frighten him enough to make him flee from his place beneath the Bo tree. Smiling, Siddhartha simply touched the ground upon which he sat, saying, in effect, "I have a right to be here and here I will stay!" Traditionally, the third temptation is always the subtle temptation of pride. Whispering in Siddhartha's ear, Mara congratulated him on his spiritual growth, telling him that his insights and dedication were too profound for normal people to understand and that it would be profitless to attempt to teach them to others. But Siddhartha resisted and conquered. At last, Mara departed.







On the verge of his enlightenment, Prince Siddhartha is seated beneath the Bodhi Tree by Chöying Dorje (17th century) (Public Domain)

With this spiritual victory over temptation he passed through all stages of awareness. In a vision he saw all his previous incarnations and understood their connectedness, how they had brought him to this point in time and place. Now he sensed Karma at work—the guiding force that propels life forward. More important, in a sudden intuitive leap, he grasped how to break out of *Samsara*, the wheel of life, death, and rebirth. He had finally found that for which he had been searching, even though he had not known what he was looking for. He achieved the goal of his quest. He became the Buddha, the Enlightened One.



Panorama made from an 18th century Burmese watercolor parabeik (picture book) showing scenes from the life of Gautama Buddha. (CC BY-SA 4.0)

## Dharma The Middle Way

He called his insight the *Dharma*, the Middle Way that leads between the poles of all opposites to Nirvana, the place beyond, which embraces all dualities. Duality means pair of opposites. One half of every pair of opposites is uncomfortable. The natural human tendency is to identify with that which is good, comfortable, or otherwise desirable. The Buddha saw this was impossible. Unless both poles of opposites are embraced, one cannot be content, because both poles are real and make up the fabric of life. To remain insulated from one pole or the other is to live in denial. Eventually, even if someone dwells in a palace, he or she must journey outside the walls to experience the reality that is comprised of life in all its totality. Denying or even ignoring death and sickness does not make them less real. All it creates is anxiety, because the human psyche knows they are inevitable.

What the Buddha came to understand is a profound psychological truth that has become a part of every culture on Earth. It is so common that one forgets that Siddhartha was the first to put it into words, to frame it in a way that easily transcends culture and language.



Symbol of Yin-Yang (CC BY-SA 2.0)

## The Yin and Yang of Balance

Sometime later, in the fifth century BC, China began to face a long period of war and political turmoil. People at all levels of society were caught up in a struggle that was both secular and spiritual. Especially in those days, Chinese spirituality revolved around the balance of *Yin* and *Yang*. These two forces represented the opposite poles through which the Buddha embraced the Middle Way.

Yin was feminine, Yang, masculine. Yin was romantic, intuitive, feeling oriented, and right-brained. Yang was rational, thoughtful, intellectual, and left-brained. Together they represented the contrasting but all-encompassing principles of the *Tao*. Found in both male and female and throughout the natural world, Yin and Yang had to be in balance if people were to function completely and harmoniously. But the cultural power struggles had destroyed the people's balance. They began to wonder what had gone wrong, what they had done to destroy the harmony of daily existence.



# 圖形現兒嬰

他日雲飛方見真人朝上帝

潛龍今已化飛龍  
變現神通不可窮  
一朝跳出珠光外  
淺身直到紫微宮

神水清涼  
脫離根株  
內外無塵  
長養靈源



夫醫治之真  
孕結胎之子  
傳其精氣  
神其氣  
此神胎之大  
小無得此真

氣穴法名無盡藏  
藏也於寂寂空空  
我問空中誰氏子  
危云是你主人翁

衍水金財  
龍虎守神  
歸納若存  
念氣在茲

此時丹葵更須慈孝情嬰兒

The Immortal Soul of the Taoist from The Secret of the Golden Flower (1962) (Public Domain)

In some ways that era resembled the destructive, largely inter-generational conflicts many Americans experienced during the 1960s. Power and politics, religion and psychology, gender and racial equality, war and peace—all were examined anew. Traditional values were turned upside down. Almost every guiding principle that society at large once believed to be true, was thrown open for debate. It was a time of long-haired hippies and flower children who competed for space on the evening news

with dark-suited, crew-cut businessmen and politicians. In confusion, some young people who protested against war donned uniforms and formed paramilitary cells. It was Woodstock versus the New York Philharmonic—communes versus Wall Street—protest marches versus “My country: Love it or leave it!”

## K'ung Ch'iu Confucius

In the fifth-century BC in China, just as in 1960s America, liberal and conservative traditions developed.

The conservative faction was represented by the teachings of a scholar named K'ung Ch'iu, who became known to the world as Confucius. His advice was not to overthrow existing society, but rather to do it better. He taught that people had to learn how to be better farmers, better politicians, better friends, better parents, and better children. He believed that people must strive to become what, in fact, they already were, even if they had forgotten what that was. The cultural infrastructure was already intact. People just had to make it work as it had been intended to work. Confucius personified the Yang side of Chinese philosophy. His object was not to destroy what was already in place, but to reform existing social institutions, thereby reforming the people who lived within those institutions.



Confucius (1770) Granger Collection. (Public Domain)



Sakyamuni, Lao Tzu, and Confucius  
(1368 until 1644) Freer Gallery of Art.  
(Public Domain)

### Lao-tzu The Old Man

Lao-tzu ('the old man') was a contemporary of Confucius. Today he is recognized as the founder of what has come to be known as *Taoism*, or 'The Way'. Lao-tzu was Yin to Confucius' Yang. He was the liberal to Confucius' conservative, the hippie to Confucius' establishment. Lao-Tzu was romantic, intuitive, feeling-oriented, and right-brained. He thought that cultural traditions and social infrastructures were not answers to the problem. Instead, they were the problem itself. If he were to survey today's western culture, he would probably insist that big business, religious institutions, and political systems are not corrupted by society, but rather they are the very cause of the corruption. According to Lao-Tzu, power, inherently imbedded in the systems themselves, was the root source of systemic corruption.

Confucius meets Lao-tzu and Buddhist Arhat (Ming Dynasty)  
Palace Museum, Beijing. (Public Domain)





A story, which may or may not be true, has been passed down that Confucius once met Lao-tzu, who was somewhat older and thus, according to Chinese custom, worthy of the respect given to an elder. After the interview Confucius said: *"Of birds, I know they have wings to fly with, of fish, that they have fins to swim with, of wild beasts, that they have feet to run with. For feet, there are traps, for fins, nets, for wings, arrows. But who knows how dragons surmount wind and cloud into heaven? This day I have seen Lao-tzu, and he is a dragon."*

### Last Man Standing

If the two men had been interviewed following their meeting, and if they had been asked about spiritual growth, Confucius might have said, "Reform society!" Lao-tzu would have replied, "Burn, baby, burn!" In essence, what for Confucius was the sum total of the ideal society—order and material gain, structure, and formal learning—was, for Lao-tzu, the epitome of death and decay. Most Chinese, raised in the tradition of balance, prudently adopted both approaches to their spiritual ideology. Confucianism spoke to their social and family needs. Siddhartha's Buddhism answered questions about life and death. Lao-tzu's Taoism freed their inner nature. It was said that Chinese leaders were Buddhist by religion, Confucian at work, and Taoist in retirement.



Jesus, Buddha, Lao-Tse, Moses, Muhammed, and the Eye of God (Hbangerb/ CC BY-SA 4.0)

Perhaps the answer to modern questions about a proper response to the nature of spirituality can be found in these historical examples of a culture that faced the problem of radical change that affected both outward social

institutions and inward spirituality. The people's response was to allow inward spirituality to affect the social network and infrastructure already in place. In this way, the masters still can teach us.

*This excerpt is adapted from **Faith, Trust & Belief: A Trilogy of the Spirit**, by Jim Willis, AuthorHouse, 2007.*

*Top Image: Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden (1437) Metropolitan Museum of Art (CC0)*

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