

Confucianism

Basic Information

Who

Confucianism was founded by Kung Fu Tzu (Confucius), a Chinese philosopher and educator. He lived from 551 to 479 BCE. He believed that his philosophy could transform individuals and society into a more harmonious unit.

What

Confucianism is a socio-philosophical system aimed at bettering individuals and society. Its primary goals were to educate people to be self-motivated and self-controlled, and to enable people to assume their responsibilities, which would, in turn, cultivate a better self and a harmonious society. Confucius believed that lawlessness and social problems stemmed from the combination of unenlightened individuals and a social structure without norms.

When

Confucius lived between 551 and 479 BCE. His teachings were carried on and promoted by his disciple Mencius, and, later, by Hsun-Tzu, who lived from about 300 to 235 BCE. A rationalist form of Neo-Confucianism, an outgrowth of Confucianism, began to gain popularity through the teachings of Chu Hsi, who lived from 1033 to 1107 CE. A more socially oriented Neo-Confucianism became popular through the teachings of Wang Yang-Ming, who lived from 1472 to 1529 CE.

Where

Confucianism began in China and spread through Southeast and East Asia, gaining popularity in Japan, Korea and Vietnam as well. For a long period of time, Confucianism had empirical acceptance and validity, as the Chinese emperors and their dynasties saw it as the official philosophy of the empire.

Who Is God?

There is no God, per se, in Confucianism. Confucius has never been considered a god by his adherents. Confucianism is a socio-philosophical movement aimed at bettering society. Confucius did believe, however, in the Great Ultimate (Tao), which manifests itself in the I, or change. Tao is the cause of I, and generates Yang (energy) and Yin (a passive form). Together, Yin and Yang are seen as complementary symbols of the energy and tension in a system of counter forces. Tao, or the Great Ultimate, is the first-cause of the universe, a force that flows through all life, but is not a personal being.

Where Did We Come From?

The interaction between the Yin and Yang is thought to be the cause for the creation of all that is. Tao, the Great Ultimate, is the cause of change and generates Yin and Yang. Therefore, we came from Tao, the Great Ultimate, the force that permeates the universe.

Why Are We Here?

Ultimately, we are here to discover our real self, which is the nature of Tao. Humans are thought to be inherently good. Through self-discipline, a human is able to move in accordance to Tao and thus will enjoy the principle of change. In a practical sense, we are here to better ourselves and society. This is done through education and enlightenment.

How Do We Know?

We know and understand Confucianism through his writings and those of his disciples. The major works of Confucius include:

Lun Yu, or the Wisdom of Confucius.

Chung Yung, or Doctrine of the Mean.

Ta Hsueh, or the Great Learning.

Confucius is thought to have studied the *I Ching*, or Classic of Changes, a Chinese manual of divination.

His disciple, Mencius, wrote several books, including *The Mencius Ev Ya*, a dictionary of terms, and *Kung-yang Chuan*, a commentary on *Ch'un Ch'iu*.

What Do We Have To Do?

Above all, Confucius felt that the ideal of shu, or reciprocity, should guide all actions; what you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others. Confucius also prescribed seven steps in a strategy to achieve social transformation and to bring about the ideal society.

1. The investigation of things and variables to discover their nature and to determine how they are connected.
2. The completion of knowledge. Determining why things are the way they are, why they are related. This is truth, or Tao, and the discovery of Tao empowers a person's transformation.
3. Sincerity of thought. The desire for transformation and change in accordance with Tao must be sincere. Sincerity reaches full expression in the ability to foreknow.
4. Rectifying the heart. It is important to have proper motivations for change, motivations that are good for the self and for society as a whole. Virtue and a moral self is the goal, and it is achieved through the integration of Jen (humanity, benevolence, perfect virtue, compassion, and love), Yi (righteousness), Li (politeness, respect), and wisdom. This will free the self from evil and provide the moral courage and the ability to be good.
5. Cultivation of the person. Integrating the knowledge self (steps one and two) and the moral self (steps three and four) through self-discipline, or education, and self-improvement.
6. Regulating the family. The practice of self-discipline within the family through honoring parents, respecting and caring for siblings and loving children. Understanding the weakness of those one likes, appreciating the strength of those one dislikes, toward the end of avoiding prejudice and disharmony.
7. Governance of the state. A good state will provide public education, will set policies to care for vulnerable people, make policies based on public opinion, appoint and elect capable, moral people, and apply the principles of "mean" management. Good public administration should lead to the ideal harmonious state.

Confucius saw five major human relationships that should be governed by li, or propriety. Those relationships are:

1. Ruler and subject
2. Father and son

3. Husband and wife
4. Oldest son and younger brothers
5. Elders and juniors (friends)

Shu, or reciprocity, is seen in the five relationships as follows:

1. Benevolence in rulers, loyalty in ministers and subjects
2. Kindness in the father, filial piety in the son
3. Righteous behavior in the husband, obedience in the wife
4. Gentility in the oldest son, humility and respect in the younger siblings
5. Humane consideration in elders, deference in juniors.

What's Going On Today?

Today, Confucianism is mainly practiced in China, Japan, the Koreas and Vietnam. There are over six million adherents of Confucianism. While it was once the state philosophy in China, its popularity has dwindled drastically since the Communists came to power.

Sources: Chung, Douglas K. Confucianism: A Portrait. In Beversluis, Joel (Ed.). (1995). *A Sourcebook for Earth's Community of Religions*. Grand Rapids