

FINAL THOUGHTS

Their Lives Compared

Lecture 34

Aside from the fabulous birth narratives and the occasional anecdotes about their early lives, we are able to say very little about these four individuals prior to adulthood. ... Whatever the nature of their prescribed education, it is clear that each of them had a thirst for understanding.

Without losing sight of their rootedness in particular times and places, we will now put those contextual matters in the background so we might give greater attention to the similarities and differences in the lives and teachings of our four sages to determine, as far as possible, what significance these four have for our lives today.

All four sages were born into old, well-established civilizations in the midst of momentous changes. The natures of those changes, however, were not the same. In view of their cultural settings, part of the greatness of each of these teachers must lie in his attunement to the profound issues driving the changes in his society and the clarity of his vision to imagine a way through them. Certainly, that keen awareness was rooted in a heightened sensitivity to the suffering of others.

Each of the four sages could claim a noble heritage but was unable or unwilling to take advantage of his ancestry. More importantly, each tried to redefine nobility as a matter of character, not birth.

The histories of the early lives of our sages are sketchy at best. Each is the subject of stories about how his early life foretold his future greatness or indicated something about his mature outlook on life. What does this really tell us? Probably not a great deal. It is likely that each of these stories was created and transmitted by pious followers who were using fictional devices to convey their beliefs. The stories tell us more about the impressions that Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad left on their followers than anything of great significance about their historical lives. In terms of marital and family arrangements, Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad

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seem to represent the gamut of human possibilities. As with their families of origin, it is difficult to draw compelling conclusions about the role that marriage and children may have played in their spiritual outlooks.

Little is known about these sages' formal education (or lack thereof), but each had a thirst for understanding and a fearless love for the truth that inspired them to endure hardships, such as persecution, exile, harsh asceticism, and even death. All four eventually committed themselves to a life of material simplicity, yet none of them believed there was anything intrinsically wrong with wealth and possessions—rather, they were distractions from the noble life.

All four were committed to spiritual discipline; all thought that becoming a certain kind of person by means of deliberate activities was essential, but each practiced different disciplines. But amid their diverse practices, one form of discipline is common to all four of these sages. Its commonality and centrality in their lives makes it tempting to suggest that perhaps this exercise was the secret of their success: All took time to be quiet, to focus on interior

experience, and to allow the mind to settle and become receptive to what the world had to teach them.

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The lives of our four sages remind us of the necessity to stop and pay attention to our lives. Taking time to be quiet and attending to our lives need not result in some

intense, enlightening religious experience. Indeed, such intense moments are rare. But it must be a regular practice. It is simply a way to remind ourselves of what is *really* important, because we forget.

Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad were four lives separated by culture and time, each nurtured in different ways, each brought up with different educations and in different religious traditions, yet connected by a desire to live life to its fullest extent, to understand it at its deepest levels, and to face its truths with courage. ■

Lecture 34: Their Lives Compared

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Questions to Consider

1. Has formal education or mentoring played a role in your spiritual or philosophical life? What about the lives of your faith or tradition's leaders?
2. What spiritual or other disciplines, if any, have you found most valuable to your own development?

Their Teachings Compared

Lecture 35

Among those who first began to suggest that religions were pretty much the same were the critics of religion, those who thought humanity would be better off without it. Today, many religious folk themselves advocate this perspective, not to put an end to religion, of course, but to see the great divisions and rancor among religions, which have been the source of so much human anguish, diminished and perhaps eliminated.

Comparing religious teachers is not the same thing as comparing religions, which are far more complex realities than the philosophies of individuals. But it is much easier to compare specific teachings than to compare whole religions, and doing so might offer some insight into the problems facing our religiously plural world.

It is in the metaphysical arena that we see some of the greatest differences among Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. Not only did they think of the ultimate reality in different ways; they thought differently about the importance of thinking about it. Confucius and the Buddha were reluctant to engage in matters they considered speculative. For Jesus and Muhammad, these topics were central to their perspectives; they were not matters of mere speculation because they had been disclosed in revelation. Yet it is important to note that there were some points at which the metaphysical teachings of all four converge: Each regarded reality as comprising different realms (at a minimum, heaven and earth) and diverse sorts of beings. They each posited an absolute or ultimate reality, and they all agreed that this absolute—whatever it is—is critical to human welfare. But here is how they contrast: To Confucius and the Buddha, the ultimate reality was beyond the gods; for Jesus and Muhammad, however, the one god *was* the ultimate reality.

This raises a question: If Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad agree that there is some absolute or unconditional reality, are they all talking about the same reality even though they conceptualize and speak of it differently? Some say yes: There is an absolute beyond words, as all four sages (and perhaps all major religions) attest; this ultimate reality is conceived and

expressed in different terms and images for cultural and linguistic reasons. Some say no: Father, al-Lah, the unconditioned, and heaven ultimately mean different things; *how* we think of the absolute is significant. Those who see real differences among these metaphysical views might go on to make other claims: Not all of these sages can be correct.

But one need not take that approach. It is possible to say that Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad were teaching different visions of the ultimate reality leading to different ways of being genuinely human. That does not mean that *any* interpretation is appropriate or *every* style

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of life is equally suitable. For each of the sages, some ways of living are clearly superior to others.

For the most part, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad worked within the frameworks of their cultures' basic understandings of human nature. Only the Buddha offered a comprehensive teaching on the nature of body and self. All four sages believed in the spiritual equality of all persons. Their chief differences were in their understandings of the fundamental problems besetting human beings.

As Axial and post-Axial Age thinkers, all considered the present state of humanity as undesirable. In the Axial Age, religion came to be associated less with sustaining life than with effecting personal transformation. For Confucius, the solution to humanity's problems was education in moral virtue; for the Buddha, it was education in the true nature of reality and themselves. For both Jesus and Muhammad, it was education in the way established for them by God.

The final destinies of humankind envisioned by the four sages are as different as their estimations of the human predicament. Confucius promised no blissful afterlife. The Buddha promised the end to rebirth. Jesus promised eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Muhammad promised a return to

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Paradise, from which Adam and Eve were exiled. Although imagined in different ways, all four sages indicate that satisfaction or happiness lies at the end of the path for those who practice the way of the noble life. There is an optimistic tenor to each of their teachings.

There is no doubt that all four teachers saw the ethical dimension of life as playing a key role in the meaning and purpose of existence and the ultimate human destiny, an influence of Axial Age thinking. Interestingly, Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad seem to be closest to one another when we consider their ethical views. All four sages thought that self-centeredness is at the heart of human misery, although they had different solutions (the example of the ancient sages, the comprehension of no-self, and a life centered in God) to the problem. All agreed that the way out of our misery is by the path of kindness, compassion, and humility. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Have you noticed any similarities among our four sages not mentioned in this lecture? Are there other differences you find worthy of note?
2. Does your own spiritual or philosophical tradition (whether derived from one of these four sages or from elsewhere) give primacy to the problem of selfishness, or does it offer another cause as the root of human misery?
3. Besides those solutions offered by our four sages to the problem of selfishness, what other solutions have you heard suggested? Have any of them been of value to you?

Their Enduring Significance

Lecture 36

Our four teachers sought to redefine [nobility] in ways that made it accessible to anyone, regardless of heritage or social position. By their very lives, they exemplified ways for human beings to live noble lives and invited the rest of us to aspire to do the same. Their teachings and examples tell us that we are capable of much more than we think.

For me and many others, Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad attract our attention not only because they are fascinating historical figures but because their words and examples enrich our lives. Living during times when nobility was understood as a quality of birth, our four teachers redefined it as something accessible to anyone, and their lives were their proof. Yet they are equally clear in telling us the noble life is no easy path. Today, we are more likely to be taught to pursue excellence. Nobility involves excelling, but it also involves discerning which pursuits are worth the effort.

The requirements of the noble life are not difficult to understand, but they are hard to implement. The first requisite is commitment to truth and understanding. Personally, I know I often prefer my pleasant illusions to disturbing realities. What all of our four teachers tell us is that truth is nothing to fear; seeing the world and ourselves as we really are is liberating.

The corollary to a commitment to truth is humility—not self-abasement but honest self-knowledge. The wiser they became, the more the four sages became humble. It's a bit ironic, in a way, that those whom many have judged as humanity's most influential persons have led lives of such simplicity and modesty.

The commitment to truth and humility draws our attention to another virtue shared by these teachers: They were willing to learn, which takes both love for the truth and the awareness of one's limitations. And learning, in turn, requires attentiveness. We have already spoken of the way each teacher set aside time for regular periods of stillness and quietude. I even suggested

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that this practice comes close to being the single most important factor in the development of their spiritual depths. I fear that our culture has almost completely lost sight of the importance of this discipline. We have become accustomed to seeking ever-new sources of stimulation, and we exercise little

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control over the things we allow to shape our minds. Our world needs to rediscover the importance of being quiet and paying attention and to make a place for these practices in our daily lives.

The noble life as practiced by our sages also entails sensitivity to suffering, both our own and that of others. The great emphasis placed on awareness of suffering by these teachers invites us to examine our lives as individuals and cultures to determine the ways we desensitize ourselves to this fundamental dimension of experience.

Finally, the four sages recognized that the core problem of self-centeredness was manifested in many ways, not simply in the tendency of the individual to act selfishly. Although explained and presented in different ways, for all four sages, the solution to the predicament of self-centeredness lies in transforming our conditioned ways of thinking and acting: Transformation begins in waking up to reality, to gaining clear apprehension.

While on certain aspects of the noble life the four sages appear to come close to one another, in other areas each has something unique to offer. Perhaps Confucius's most interesting belief is his faith in the near-magical power of virtue. Confucius thought that virtuous persons would effortlessly inspire others to act morally. We actually see that phenomenon displayed in the lives of our four teachers. The Buddha's teachings on non-attachment are clear and compelling arguments for the dangers of holding on too tightly to anything—not just material objects but ideas as well. This warning, coupled with his rigorous criteria for approaching claims of truth, seems particularly appropriate for our information-saturated world. Much of Christian belief focuses on the divinity of Jesus; without setting that aside, the view of Jesus

Lecture 5: The Enduring Significance

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presented in these lectures invites us to focus on his humanity for a time, particularly his affirmation of life in the face of death and the courage he showed in practicing his own convictions. Muhammad, like the Buddha, reminds us of our own forgetfulness and demonstrates through his spiritual discipline how to remember to remember. He also invites us to accept the inscrutability of the ultimate reality.

It is customary in Buddhism to conclude such endeavors as this course with a dedication of merits to others. Accordingly, I offer whatever merits that may have been generated by my efforts to the well-being and happiness of my wife and daughter, whose own efforts and sacrifices have made my work possible and who have enriched my life beyond measure; to the good people of The Great Courses, whose hard work and dedication make all of this possible; and to those of you who have accompanied me on this journey. May each and every one of you—and indeed may *all* beings—be well and happy. ■

Question to Consider

1. How might you incorporate the wisdom of each of the sages in your own spiritual life and within the parameters of your own faith tradition or ethical philosophy?

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