

A Teacher's Guide to
The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About the Good Life
by Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Path, based on the lessons of one of Harvard University's most popular undergraduate courses, introduces readers to Chinese philosophers living over 2000 years ago—Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi—as well as to a philosophical text, the *Inward Training*. The authors focus on philosophers who offer powerful and often counterintuitive thoughts on what it takes to become a better person and to create a better world. These ideas call into question many common assumptions we hold today about how to achieve a successful and flourishing life.

In particular, they rebut popular notions: you must look within and accept your true self; power comes from being strong and dominant; planning ahead achieves the best outcomes; everything natural is better. Instead, they propose that we are better off thinking of ourselves as constantly evolving, that power can come from seeming weakness, that planning our lives out boxes us in, and that artifice has its place. *The Path* also addresses common and persistent misconceptions and stereotypes about East Asian philosophy and China's place in world history.

The authors highlight the practical nature of these ideas through examples that illustrate how they can be put into practice in everyday life. These ideas and practices challenge our cultural assumption that to enact change—whether in your own life, your own relationships, or the world at large—you need to think big, plan ahead, and know who you are. *The Path* is not a path out there that you follow; it is something you forge as you go, through every action you take. Small shifts are what actually effect change in every aspect of our lives.

The book concludes by pointing out what sort of a world has emerged from the ideas we hold dear, and points the way to how we might live differently.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 1: The Age of Complacency

1. What do the authors say is the problem with thinking in terms of “traditional” or “modern”?
2. What are your thoughts on authenticity? Name some examples of ways that authenticity and the notion of the true self are revered by people today.

Chapter 2: The Age of Philosophy

1. Describe the Axial Age. Why might societal changes of this nature have resulted in the flourishing of philosophical movements across Eurasia?
2. Do you see any similarities between the Age of Philosophy as described by the authors and our own age today?

Chapter 3: On Relationships: Confucius and As-If Rituals

1. What are some of your stereotypes about Confucius and Confucian thinking?
2. Why do the *Analects* focus so much on mundane anecdotes about Confucius's daily life?
3. What is the difference between habitual rituals and Confucian rituals? How can Confucian rituals lead to growth and change?
4. Describe a rut in your own life, as well as an as-if ritual that might help you break it.
5. What is the difference between a "true" self and a fragmented, malleable one?
6. Think of a person in your life as a set of "dispositions" rather than as a stable personality. How does thinking of this person this way lead you to interact differently?
7. What is Confucian goodness, and why did Confucius avoid defining it?

Chapter 4: On Decisions: Mencius and the Capricious World

1. Describe the philosophical differences between Mozi and Mencius, specifically their view of the world as either "coherent" or "capricious." Which mindset do you agree with more? Which mindset seems to prevail today?
2. How, in your own life, do you tend to approach big life decisions?
3. Why was the concept of goodness so important to Mencius? How is goodness related to decision making?
4. What does it mean to have a "refined response" to a "highly challenging interpersonal situation"? (p. 75). How might this look different from, say, an "authentic" reaction, and how might the result differ?

Chapter 5: On Influence: Laozi and Generating Worlds

1. Have you heard of the Way? What did you think that it was before reading this chapter? What do the authors tell us that Laozi means by the Way?
2. What removes us from the Way?
3. What does it mean to generate the Way on the level of social interactions?
4. What is Laozi's view on power and strength? On weakness? What does he mean by "strength through weakness"? Why does overt strength cause us to lose the Way?
5. How does creating a world that seems natural allow you to become more powerful? Can you think of a situation in your own life in which you can change the outcome by subtly changing the underlying situation?

Chapter 6: On Vitality: The *Inward Training* and Being Like a Spirit

1. Describe common ways that we have thought of the notion of agency, and why we have developed such a notion. What contrasting notion of agency does the *Inward Training* propose we consider instead?
2. What are the different gradations of qi? What are the energies of divinity?
3. What sorts of things drain your spirit in your daily life? What energizes you and fills you with vitality?
4. Describe the five virtues of the *Wuxing* that you should keep in balanced tension with one another. How can you cultivate that sort of balanced tension in your own life?
5. How do music, poetry, art, and literature help you to refine your qi?

Chapter 7: On Spontaneity: Zhuangzi and a World of Transformation

1. How does Zhuangzi's view of the Way differ from Laozi's?
2. What do we tend to think of as spontaneous behavior? Contrast that with Zhuangzian spontaneity.
3. Where would Zhuangzi say creativity comes from? How does holding tightly to a concept of yourself as a "self" inhibit your ability to be creative?
4. Take note of some times in your life when you focus on things based on habitual patterns of attention. What can you do to break those patterns? How can you cultivate expansiveness?

5. How does Zhuangzi's style of storytelling help break our perspective?

Chapter 8: Xunzi and Putting Pattern on the World

1. What would Xunzi say is the problem with self-acceptance?
2. How did the age that Xunzi lived in influence his philosophical ideas?
3. Describe Xunzi's thoughts on artifice. Do you agree?
4. What are Xunzi's concerns with seeing the world as "natural"?
5. How might Xunzian thinking about "constructing a world" apply to the times we live in now?

Chapter 9: The Age of Possibility

1. What is the significance of the opening epigraph to the chapter?
2. Why do the authors say that we are in danger of "accepting a traditional worldview and returning to a traditional society"?
3. How does our misreading of history, and China's place in it, affect the way we see both China/Asia today, and the West?
4. Describe the difference between how the West and China broke down aristocratic worlds. How did the West's approach lead to the sort of societal problems that we have today?
5. What is the romanticized view that we have of Chinese and of Asian ideas, and why is this problematic?
6. What did Western observers think was happening in the Chinese ancestor worship ritual, and what was really happening? What is the significance of that?
7. To live in a fractured and fragmented world, as the authors put it, can be seen as a negative thing. Why do they describe it as full of potential and possibility? Describe how seeing your own life and own society as fragmented rather than coherent might encourage you to think differently about your own agency and efficacy.

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